

Burnout Fever

By

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Part 1: Burnout Fever

Chapter One

Barry Lieber absently backed open the shop's glass door, momentarily lost in the fluttery 'A'-shaped swirls atop a pair of mocha lattes. When it unexpectedly swung free, he nearly lost his balance. Deftly negotiating around the surprised woman who held the handle, he managed to rescue the drinks, but at the expense of the floating art show. "Damn. And he nearly got it nailed this time."

Melanie Stroub, a bit older than Barry at 30, looked up from the events section of the West Seattle Weekly. Although her hair was the same mousy brown as Barry's, she treated it like the home note of a chord, adding rust and gold streaks. "What?"

He wove through a clutter of vacant ceramic-topped sidewalk tables and handed her a drink. "The logo. You'll have to take my word for it, though. All there's left now is a jumble."

She peered briefly at the chaotic surface swirls, and smiled. "Thanks. It's nothing to get that cute Semitic nose out of joint about, though."

October had begun asserting itself, and the cloud deck over West Seattle was about to swallow the warming sun. Barry stood for a while, gazing past the Puget Sound at the still-glistening Olympic Mountains before joining her for their Sunday morning ritual.

"Ritual," he muttered, grinning privately at the thought. Theirs was an accepting town, but he wasn't too sure how some of his neighbors would react to learning that there were a couple of witches in their midst. But then, with Samhain — or rather Halloween — around the corner, you could get away with most anything.

Roused from reverie by the soft burring of Melanie's watch alarm, he turned just in time to see her spill coffee on both her breakfast and the newspaper while reaching to open the cover of

her palmtop.

A few months earlier, when they'd discovered that their favorite sandwich shop had installed a wireless Internet hub, the two started a local fashion by breakfasting over coffee, bagels and a sort of Mystery Science Theater 3000 version of Dr. Wilfred McQuarry's webcast sermons. At first it was just the two of them out for a lark, but after a few weeks, a small crowd of regulars joined the fun.

"It's a good thing McQuarry's holed up in that backwoods commune near Shasta Lake," Barry said as he joined her at the table.

She looked a question at him while mopping the spill.

He smiled. "What? Come on, Mel. It's not like he's got a sense of humor or anything."

"Give me a break, Barry. If I had a guardian Angel, do you think she'd put up with spilling coffee on a garlic bagel? Now that's sacrilege."

"Hey guys!"

Lieber looked up.

It was Ronnie, one of the regulars. He spun a nearby chair around for his partner, and slid in beside Melanie. "Are we late?"

She grinned. "I suppose that depends on your point of view."

"And your preferred definition," Barry added. "Did you mean deceased... or tardy?"

"Take my word for it," Al said as he set a cardboard tray down and eased into the empty chair, "Ronnie's not dead."

Ronnie crossed his arms with a melodramatic flourish. "And here I thought you liked delayed gratification."

"Guys, guys!" Melanie chided. "Can we get some focus here? It's time for our guest of honor to arrive. Gather 'round and let the fun begin."

While the others bunched their chairs for a better view of the palmtop's display, Melanie brought up McQuarry's website and clicked into the webcast page. Soon, a tiny window opened, with the group's winged 'A' logo flapping in the digital breeze.

A woman with a French Canadian accent ran through the preacher's familiar boilerplate introduction spiel. "From the mystical lake at the foot of scenic Mount Shasta, welcome to the Reverend Wilfred McQuarry's weekly sermon. Today's talk..."

"I should sue them for stealing my design," Al snipped, brushing the similar design on his t-shirt with a thumb. "After all, I've been wearing these wings longer than he's been on IP."

"Besides," Ronnie lilted, eyeing his partner, "it looks a lot better on you."

Melanie giggled. "Now there's an image I think I'll suppress: McQuarry kicking back after a grueling day on the lecture circuit, rumpled logo t-shirt stained with beer, and a gaggle of psychopaths fawning over him."

"I think your spell-checker needs an overhaul," Barry said sagely. "Your favorite word for suck-ups doesn't start with a 'p'."

"So p-sue me!" she said, splattering him with cream cheese.

While Barry grabbed a napkin, the logo on the display faded into McQuarry's pudgy face, and then the camera pulled back enough to reveal just how overweight he really was.

"Good morning," the postage stamp preacher squeaked. "I'm so happy that you could all join me for today's sermon."

"How about McQuarry the weatherman?" Ronnie said suddenly, pointing at features on an imaginary keyed-in map.

"—continue with the series I've been doing," McQuarry was saying. "Last time, we talked about the big picture, about how the social and political movements of the past were really stories told by the community of Angels on a stage called Earth."

"Here it is," Melanie said, tapping the coffee-soaked reviews page. "McQuarry's Angel Repertory Theater, currently touring with a road show version of 'The Devil and Daniel Webster', performed entirely with meat-puppets."

"Today," the tiny image said, "we'll discuss how our Angels give us all the stage directions we need to play our parts in these stories."

"Hey," Barry whispered conspiratorially, "if we're the actors in these things, shouldn't we all get union cards?"

As if in response, McQuarry raised his hand into frame and flipped through a sheaf of paper marked 'Script'. "Now, these stories are not written out beforehand like a movie or TV show, but there is a kind of creative conference that happens behind the scenes. That's where our Angels decide what parts we'll be playing, and how they'll coach us."

"Anyone got a bell I can ring?" Melanie asked in mock seriousness. "I need to speak with my coach."

Al raised a finger and opened his mouth, but relented when Ronnie quickly said, "That's not what she means."

"What about free will?" Barry asked.

Melanie smiled. "The movie whale?"

McQuarry lowered the prop. "Different groups of Angels have been in charge of different stories. The Angels guiding the Renaissance, for example, were a different group than the ones behind the military dramas played out during the 20th century."

Ronnie struck a pose. "Did he just say that some drama queen Angel had its hand up Hitler's jacket?"

"More likely," Melanie shot back, "somewhere a bit lower."

"Now that's a nasty thought," Barry said.

The camera pulled closer. "They talk to us in our sleep. They whisper to us through our heads and our hearts. Some of us listen; others do not. We may understand what they say, or get it twisted and hurt people we were meant to help."

"He's right," Melanie agreed. "Actors can be so hard to work with."

"But what I want you all to understand today is this. Your Angel knows more than you do about why some things are in your life. They know that there's a greater purpose, a higher reason for all of us taking part in their stories."

"You bet!" Barry said. "Ratings. If they don't keep the big guy amused, he'll pull their funding. Then where'll they be? Whoever said that hell was a badly written sitcom was right."

"Besides," Melanie added, "how do we know we should trust these Angels, anyway? For all we know, they're setting us up to be the patsy in some product placement scheme. I can see it now. The world gets into some kind of crisis, and then just when you think the world is going to blow itself up, there's this..."

She just sat there for a while, staring at McQuarry's tiny image, frozen in mid-gesture.

"Mel? You okay?"

"Yeah," Ronnie whispered. "Did you lose your place or something?"

Ignoring their questions, she slowly lowered her arms, her usual look of amusement displaced by an odd seriousness. She leaned towards the palmtop.

Barry gently laid his hand on her shoulder. "What's going on, Mel?"

She shushed them. "Keep it down, huh? I'm trying to hear this."

Ronnie slid his chair back. "I think you ought to take her home, Barry. Something definitely doesn't seem right here."

"Yeah. I'll... I'll let her finish the sermon first, though."

McQuarry wrapped up his stagecraft metaphor, and moved on to the many ways in which his Angels try to get through to us.

Barry hardly breathed, for fear of shattering whatever fragile spell she was under. He shivered from the freshening wind, helplessly watching her profile against the backlit cloud deck. She was rapt; her eyes fixed on the tiny video image, her flighty fingers resting calmly on the table. It was eerie.

When the lecture was over, Melanie sat back, took a deep breath, and turned to Barry, a broad smile across her face. "I've never really appreciated his insights before. If you don't mind, I'd like to catch McQuarry's talks from home after this. I can get a better picture on the main system, and I won't have all these distractions."

He looked at her for a while before nodding in reluctant agreement. Then he shut the palmtop, bussed their table, and joined her on an uncomfortably slow walk back to their rental house.

Chapter Two

Derek Boa straightened his notes while the small crowd in front of the dais he was sitting at took their seats and quieted down. The first day and a half of Constitutional Evolution's legislative workshop at George Mason University had been more productive than he had hoped, and it was time to discuss what the group had learned.

"Good afternoon," he said when the chatter had dropped to a single hushed discussion about the Virginia legislature. The two members still talking turned to look at him, and then settled into their seats.

Derek nodded to the young redhead to his right before smiling broadly at the crowd. "I'd first like to thank every one of you for making this the most productive session we've had to date. When Gisela Kilarney first came up with the idea of simulating the process we've proposed, nobody was certain that we knew enough about the various stakeholders to represent their cases adequately. Clearly, we were wrong. In any case, now that we've walked that mile in various pairs of shoes, it's time to reflect on where we've come, and how to proceed from there. Since it was your idea, Gisela, why don't you start us off?"

Gisela looked up from her notes, and pushed a few strands of her long red hair behind her ear before speaking. "Being a gamer does have its uses, it seems. Once we'd broken the problem down into stakeholders and bits of process, setting up this weekend's activities pretty much happened on its own. Of course, our simplified version of Civics 101 from another reality probably glossed over a lot of things, but I think the model worked well enough to show us both the value and the potential pitfalls of what we're promoting."

She paused, and turned to face him. "How did you want to run this?"

Derek shrugged. "Like everything else we do, by feeling our way through it. We have representatives of each faction up here. Gisela will speak for the citizens, Rodney Falk for grassroots groups like ours, Elliot Sacchi for the corporate lobbyists, and Melissa Fox for legislators. Before we get into the new process, I think it would be useful if Melissa gave us a brief reminder of the existing process, from the point of view that her group portrayed this weekend. Melissa?"

"Sure, Derek. My father would never admit this, but when people like him are elected to public office, they don't have near as much power as we're led to believe. The legislature is a cultural and political ecosystem mired in legal precedent, lobby groups, and campaign contributors. Doing what's right may be an admirable objective, but in practice it's pretty far down on his list of priorities. As a result, when a good idea is introduced as a bill, it's either trampled to death by those it might inconvenience, or it's turned into something with no teeth, and any good it might have done is sidestepped by lawyers finding ways around it. In other words, the political system's been gamed, just like the electric grid was, and we all know the trouble that caused."

When the gathering finished being amused by Melissa's bluntness, Derek retook the floor. "Thanks. I think I may use that last remark sometime. Okay. We started the exercise yesterday morning at the first node of the process network. Regardless of whether the idea for a bill was suggested by a citizen, grassroots group, lobby or even a legislator, in our schema the next step is always public discussion of the issue. We broke into subgroups to see if there were any differences in outcome or dynamic, so I guess we ought to get a reading on how each kind went. Who wants to start?"

Elliot Sacchi, who had brought outfits for playing each of the roles, raised a hand. He was still dressed in what several members of the group had dubbed 'lawyer drag'.

Derek nodded. "Okay. I guess we'll begin with bills initiated by lobby groups."

"Our break-out session got pretty raucous," Elliot said. "What we found was that anything that a lobby group suggests is met with instant suspicion. Because the corporate forces have so much money to throw at it, everyone assumes that the implications of the proposal have been carefully worked out, and that the principal beneficiaries will be those footing the bill, as it were."

Once the groans had subsided, he continued. "We talked it over, and decided that when the big money realized this, they'd change their tactics. For them to succeed, they'd have to make it look like some other stakeholder had the idea, and then quietly step in to support it. To do this, they'd either arrange some leverage over their patsy, or get a mole into the organization. So when corporate interests want to initiate something, grass roots groups are put at risk."

"In that case," Derek said, "I guess we should next hear from Rodney about the grassroots perspective."

Rodney Falk had been an activist since he got into trouble for organizing a blacks-only softball team in the eighth grade, to prove to the coach that the umpire was making biased calls. "Representing a grassroots group in our break-out session," he began, "was a bit like being lost in a hall of mirrors. I think we demonstrated that communication is only possible between equals. The 'lobbyists' at our public discussion ignored the individual citizens entirely, and would only deal with other groups. This had two effects. First, it made the unaffiliated citizens feel marginalized, which caused them to want to join a group. And second, it cast us as equals in the eyes of the lobby group. The discussion ended up being basically two sided, grassroots versus lobby."

"In that case," Elliot said, "what do you think might have happened if the lobby group had gotten a mole into your organization?"

"Well," Rodney began slowly, "if he or she spoke up against us at the public meeting, it would certainly have weakened our position, and I'm sure the lobby group would have made the most of it. There's a lot of strategy and tactics involved."

"That leaves unaffiliated citizens and the legislator," Derek said. "Before we get to the target of all this bloodless warfare, what can you tell us about the citizen's perspective, Gisela?"

She thought for a moment. "In our session, both types of group, grassroots and lobbyists, took some time to digest the proposal and decide how it related to their particular interests. To us, it seemed like both kinds of group were so tightly focused on their agenda that the only way they could see our point was through their respective filters. It could help them, hurt them, or not matter to them. And then they reacted predictably based on that decision."

Rodney was intrigued. "Hmmm. And I though we had a hall of mirrors. Did you discuss this perspective on group behavior afterwards?"

"Yeah, and we decided that grassroots coalitions, like what happened for the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle or the accretion that solidified after the second Iraq war, would put us on stronger ground in this context as well. That means we need to get buy-in from as many other grassroots groups as possible."

"I agree," Derek added. "It also means that we'll need to establish good working relationships with them. They may have gotten the network bootstrapped, but we're building a legislative context that needs the grassroots network to balance right. And speaking of legislative, Melissa, how did things go in your session?"

"Strangely, as it turned out."

"Why? What happened?"

"Resentment, I think." She scanned the audience, some of whom were looking a bit uncomfortable. "Nobody really appreciated having an elected representative initiate the bill. The lobbyists were taken by surprise, and acted like they'd been attacked or something, the grassroots groups were offended that they hadn't been involved in the beginning of the process, and the unaffiliated citizens felt disenfranchised. It was pretty noisy in there."

"Yeah," Rodney agreed. "We could hear your group loud and clear from down the hall."

"Clearly," Derek said, "the dynamic depends on how the bill is initiated. So here's a question for everyone. Which method yields the best results?"

"For my money," Melissa said, "I'd go with the ones initiated by a coalition of grassroots groups. That eliminates the focus problem and starts us off as equals against the lobbyists fronting for the corporate fat cats. In fact, I think we ought to set up a liaison committee to talk to other groups about it."

"I agree," Elliot said. "Sitting there as a lobbyist, I'd feel a lot less sure of myself if I knew that my opposition had a bigger reach than I did. The corporations may have more money to throw at the fight, but they don't know how to mobilize people."

"Same here," Gisela added.

As the group tossed the idea around, the orderly panel discussion broke into a verbal free-for-all, so Derek pulled out his webphone and checked for email. One message in particular piqued his interest because the subject line was uncharacteristically punctuated. A moment later, he quietly excused himself from the dais and left the room.

Chapter Three

Ring... ring-ring.

Barry was folding laundry when the phone rang. After their slow walk home, Melanie had wandered into the living room, settled onto the couch, and scooped up the TV remote control. She watched whatever was on one of the Seattle broadcast channels until the first commercial break, but then started to get very nervous, squirming uncomfortably as the ads followed one another into the ether. Before the break was over, she'd grabbed the remote with both hands and managed to switch to one of the non-commercial movie channels. Since then, she'd been calmly engrossed in whatever fiction was playing, so Barry let her rest.

For some reason, though, Melanie jumped at the sound of the phone. She stared at it, with a frightened expression, while Barry walked over and picked up the receiver, then she turned back to the TV.

"Yeah?" Barry said.

"It's Derek, Bar," the voice on the other end said.

Barry nodded. "Oh, hi. I guess you got my email, then."

"I gotta tell you, you're the only person I know that can make an exclamation point mean 'drop everything and call'. I didn't understand what you wrote about Melanie. Is she okay?"

"Yes and no," Barry said quietly, opening the kitchen door so he could take the discussion out of Melanie's earshot. "Physically, I guess she's okay. Nothing's broken. She doesn't have anything I'd be able to describe to a doctor as a symptom of something, unless of course I was talking to a shrink."

"So what happened? In your email, you said she dropped to DOS. What does that mean?"

Barry shook his head. "I really wish I knew, Derek. One minute she was tearing up her favorite webevangelist, and the next she was part of his flock or something. I just don't get it."

"Tell me something," Derek said offhandedly. "Has she been overworked lately? I mean, has she been taking on too many gigs, or not decompressing between them?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Barry sat down on the front steps. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, one of my best networkers — you remember Constitutional Evolution? Anyway, last week, one of the crew dropped out temporarily. He said he felt wiped, like he'd put in too many hours of overtime, except that he hadn't, not at all. Anyway, he said he was going to take some time off to rest. So I was wondering if maybe Melanie did the same sort of thing."

"And if it was?" Barry asked. "What then?"

"Well, from what I've been hearing, there's a lot of it going around. I don't know if it's overwork or some plague from outer space, but enough people are dealing with it that someone registered a new UseNet newsgroup just to discuss the situation. If there is anything to it, I'd guess

that would be the place to find out. When I get a chance, I'll get the name of the group and email it to you."

Barry furrowed his brow. "When you get a chance? Did I interrupt something?"

"Not really. We're holding a workshop this weekend. The post mortem was beginning to take off on its own, so I checked my email. They'll be knocking ideas around for some time before they agree on a course of action, so I figured there was time to duck out for your emergency."

"In that case, I'll let you get back to it, buddy. Wouldn't want to gum up the works or anything."

Derek laughed. "There's not much of a chance of that. We're conspiring to overhaul the legislature, and that's already been gummed up."

"Yeah, yeah," Barry chuckled. "Thanks for the information. I'll catch you later."

"Sure thing."

Barry sat on the step for a while staring at the phone. He looked up when Clive and Sasha, occasional members of their Sunday morning entertainment, called to him as they pedaled past, but continued staring blankly at the house across the street after they'd passed. Finally, he flipped the phone back on, scrolled down to the insurance company's Nurse-On-Call number, and hit dial. Once he'd punched in his social security number, was through the phone maze and safely on hold, queued up for the next available nurse, he slid around and leaned back against the railing post to wait.

A few minutes later, one of the nurses came on. He explained the situation, described what happened both at the sandwich shop and in the living room, and waited for some advice. Having already spoken with Derek about it, he wasn't too surprised when she told him that it was probably overwork, and to make sure she took some time off and rested. It wasn't very useful advice, but at least it came from someone with medical training, so it made him feel a bit better about having nothing to do.

Barry stayed home for the rest of the day to keep an eye on Melanie, just in case there was any change in her condition, or if something else spooked her like the TV ads had. But despite his concern, the only incident of note was her anguish at tuning in to a movie after it had started. It wasn't exactly normal for her, but nothing to get excited over, either. Since she appeared to be stable, he went to sleep that night hoping that, like with any other case of work stress, she'd snap out of it in a few days.

Melanie was already awake when he opened his eyes the next morning, so he asked her how she'd slept.

"Like a log," she said.

"No dreams?"

She wrinkled her nose in thought. "Not that I recall."

'Well,' Barry thought as he dressed, 'at least she didn't have to deal with any of the usual bizarre context shifts that come with the territory.'

They didn't talk much over breakfast. Then, while Barry was cleaning up after their French toast, she brought a pad in from the den and started sketching what looked like angels. He'd turned off the water to get a better look, when the phone rang. She looked up from her drawing while he walked towards the phone, and then resumed sketching.

According to the caller-ID, Melanie's contract house was on the phone. Osman Creative Resources had been good for her career, and Barry didn't want to upset her, so he picked up the receiver and stepped outside.

"This is Barry," he said casually.

"Hi Barry," the voice said. "Burt Osman here. Could I speak with Melanie, please?"

He glanced back through the small window in the wooden door. "Listen, Burt," he said, "Melanie took ill over the weekend. What's up?"

"One of her customers wants her back for a return engagement. Do you remember the contract she did last year for Hennessey, McKnight and Giulliano?"

Barry grinned. "You mean the one that gave her those concert tickets for helping them with their deadline crunch?"

"That's them," Osman said. "Being on the good side of a triple threat like that does have its advantages."

"So which one of them needs her this time?"

"McKnight. He's doing some damage control for one of PanAgra's biotech lines, and specifically asked for Melanie."

"Well," Barry said, frowning, "I'm afraid they're going to have to do without her for a while. She's supposed to take some time off to recover from whatever it is she's got."

"That's too bad," Osman said. "I hope she's okay, though. Look, have her give us a call when she can."

"Sure thing," Barry said, already feeling guilty about having fudged the truth. He clicked the phone off and stood there for a moment, looking idly at the morning clouds before going back inside to see how Melanie's drawing was coming along.

Chapter Four

Julian McKnight, who, at 50, had never looked his age in his life, was the last to enter the conference room. He closed the door behind him and took his usual seat, the one just to the right of the framed sketch of downtown Bellevue that launched his first PR campaign. At least, that was what he claimed to be the reason for his choice. Deep down, though, his partners both knew that it was because it gave him a better view of Mt. Rainier.

His partners, Arthur Hennesey and Amy Giulliano, provided the marketing and advertising perspectives, respectively. When teamed with his public relations expertise, the three made a formidable team. Unfortunately, the challenge that McKnight had received from PanAgra that morning would also require the kind of writing talent that none of them possessed, which was why he looked preoccupied at the moment.

"Okay, Julian," Hennesey said, "when can she start?"

He looked away uncomfortably. "Unfortunately, she's not available at the moment. Osman said she's sick or something, and under doctor's orders to get some rest. So we'll have to find someone else, unless this can wait for her to recover."

"Damn. Can we arrange things so she can come on later?"

"Possibly," McKnight said, reestablishing eye contact, "but we'll know better after we've worked through the whole situation, and have a better understanding of where both we and PanAgra stand. I take it you've both read through the material they sent over?"

Hennesey nodded. "Apparently, they've been getting a lot of hate mail lately about one of their signature products, a kind of time-release chocolate bar."

"A what?" McKnight grinned incredulously.

"A time release chocolate bar. You know all the press about chocolate containing good brain chemicals? Well, they came up with a way to extend the effects of the stuff." He reached into a small box on the table and tossed a sample to each of his partners, then took one for himself. "They've microencapsulated the chemical in question, and set it up for time-release."

McKnight examined the wrapper. "You're kidding, right?"

Giulliano tapped her bar a few times with a recently manicured fingernail. "No. Do you realize how many of these things they sell every day? I mean, discounting the energy that you can get from them, and as a runner I can vouch for that part, the biggest reason people buy these things is the lingering effect. Go ahead. Open it and give it a try."

After he'd unwrapped the end and taken a bite, McKnight savored the taste for a while before speaking. "Okay, so it's chocolate on steroids. So what? What are the complaints about?"

Hennesey handed him a sheet of paper. "I think you ought to read it for yourself."

According to the report, it wasn't the brain chemical that was drawing all the flak, but the microencapsulation technique. PanAgra had originally developed the molecular transport technique using genetically modified organisms, and the anti-GMO crowd was blaming the chocolate bars for all manner of things. It didn't seem to matter to them that the GMOs were used to make the transporter molecules, but they weren't in the bar.

McKnight let the top of the sheet flop down. "Guilt by association?"

Giulliano nodded. "Pretty much. Yes. And since the anti-GMO people already had the public's ear, they played into it as loud and as hard as they could. And that meant that PanAgra's chocolate bar got sucked into all the brouhaha in Washington over the pending biotech legislation."

"Oh, it gets worse," Hennesey added. "Because PanAgra distributes these things overseas, there are international trade issues, multi-national health legislation, and -- heaven help us -- even the WTO to deal with on this."

McKnight smiled. "So, you could say that we have quite a chocolate mess on our hands."

Both of his partners winced. "Repeat that outside this office, Julian," Giulliano said, "and we'll be forced to tie you down and torture you."

"Okay," McKnight said, regaining his composure. "So we need to plot a course through this minefield. Considering the situation, we'll need to act as soon as possible, so here's my suggestion. It will take at least a week to work through the permutations and lay out the long-term solution. That will give Ms. Stroub some time to recover. I hope she's better soon, because she's a perfect match for the kind of layered prose we'll need written. In the meantime, we can get started on damage control. Since those press releases are more straightforward, we can make do with whomever Osman can dig up for us on short notice."

Giulliano picked up her chocolate bar. "This may take a while, and I'm going to need something more substantial than this. Who's up for Thai?"

Chapter Five

"I'm back from my meeting, Mel." Barry closed the door behind him and slipped one arm out of his jacket. "How have you--?" He stopped when he saw Melanie curled up on the couch, clutching the cushion and staring uncomfortably at the TV. He dropped his jacket on the coffee table and sat down next to her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, gently putting his hand on her shoulder.

She pulled away and wrapped her arms around her folded legs.

Barry turned to see what she'd been watching. The 'Pleasantville' DVD was spun up, and the guy who ran the diner in the sit-com world had just encountered a situation that was outside the script. One of the teenagers trapped in that world was giving him directions. The whole thing was apparently more than Melanie could handle.

He watched the scene play out for a few more moments, wondering why it had bothered her so much. Then, at a loss for an explanation, he pried the remote from her grip and switched off the player.

Once the screen went black, she relaxed and slowly turned to look at him. After catching her breath, she said, "Thanks. I didn't know it was a horror movie. The synopsis didn't say so, anyway."

"I'll tell you what. Let me pick something else for you to watch while I make us some salads, okay?"

She nodded, and pulled her pad and pencil from under his jacket.

He watched her thumb past page after page of wild pencil marks until she came to a blank sheet. She'd filled nearly half the sketchbook, and Barry wondered whether the latest drawings were also of angels.

A few minutes later, with 'Bell, Book and Candle' underway, Barry stepped into the kitchen. While he worked, he continued to puzzle over her reaction to the situation in 'Pleasantville'. When dinner was ready, rather than interrupt her story, he cleared the coffee table, and they ate in the living room.

Afterwards, he pulled out his laptop, and joined her on the couch to see if there was email from Derek. As promised, his college roommate had sent the name of the newsgroup he'd mentioned, so Barry started up the newsreader program and subscribed to the group. It didn't take long to catch up on the discussion.

One message thread was dedicated to reports of new cases. There were a lot of them. Each posting included some information about the affected person. Barry made a tally as he went along. Cases were spread over all kinds of places, and the people worked in all kinds of settings. Businesses, governments and educational institutions had all been affected. Some of them reported

multiple cases. Like with Melanie, their families were told that it was a simple case of overwork, but even though some had taken two weeks off to recover, none of them had. As a result, they were returning to work, but because they weren't anywhere close to being as productive as before, their duties were reduced by managers with heart, or they were fired by those without.

Barry closed the laptop lid, and settled in to watch some of the movie. Gillian Holroyd and her family of New York City witches were talking about how there were people like them on the subway, and the other riders didn't even know it. He looked at Melanie, and wondered just how many cases there really were. After all, not everyone knows about the UseNet, so the number of cases reported there has to be a small percentage of the actual number. The question was, what percentage was it? What did you multiply the number of messages in the thread he was reading by to get a rough estimate of the size of the problem?

Returning to the newsgroup, Barry read a discussion about how the patients' employers were dealing with the problem. Since the reports were, for the most part, second hand, the accuracy of the comments was to some extent suspect. Still, knowing that many employers dealt with the situation by hiring freelancers gave him somewhere to start. Both he and Melanie were part of that community, and that meant that he'd be able to tap other sources of information. It also meant that the freelancer community might not even be aware of how many in their ranks had already succumbed to whatever it was. After all, there isn't a communal water cooler around which a freelancer would be missed. The closest you might get would be the various email discussion groups, and there wasn't any easy way to mine that resource.

Thinking about ways to extract useful data from discussion forums reminded him that he hadn't added a report about Melanie to the other thread. On a whim, he described what happened at the sandwich shop when she flamed out, and then added some observations about the two incidents at home, first while watching ads, and then during Pleasantville.

Barry read a bit more before shutting the newsreader for the night. After that, he put his feet up on the coffee table, put an arm around Melanie, and spent the evening keeping her company. Judging from what he'd read, taking time off wouldn't have much effect. There wasn't much he could do, and the prospect of life without Melanie's sparkling wit wasn't something that he relished.

After the movie ended, Melanie sat quietly, her gaze still on the now-blank screen. Barry squeezed her gently, and said, "It's getting late. Are you ready to turn in yet?"

She looked at him. After a while, she said, "I don't know." Her voice was flat, nearly emotionless.

"Well I am. Come on in when you're finished out here."

Unsure of whether to leave it at that, Barry went to the bedroom, undressed, and climbed into bed. Regardless of Melanie's condition, he knew that for him to be sharp in the morning, he'd need some sleep.

Some time later, he opened his eyes and saw that Melanie had still not come to bed. It was after two, so he tossed off the covers and went back out to see how she was doing. When he found her still just sitting there, watching the blank TV screen, he took her hand and said, "Come to bed, Mel."

She dutifully stood up and followed him back to the bedroom. Having been given some direction, she followed through by changing into her nightshirt and joining Barry for what was left of the night.

The next two weeks went much the same way. As Barry had suspected from reading the reports on the newsgroup, time off from work didn't have any effect on Melanie's condition. She was all right as long as she had instructions to follow, or a clearly laid out task to accomplish. She could even handle scheduled tasks. But if she was faced with something that was not in the script, like the character in 'Pleasantville,' she froze like Robby the Robot had in 'Forbidden Planet' when he was ordered to shoot someone.

Once Barry discovered the rules, he set up a schedule for Melanie so he could safely leave her alone while he was off at the store or on business. With that in place, she settled into the new routine. When he thought about the changes in her personality, Barry tended to characterize them as having turned her into a sort of shallow version of herself.

After watching McQuarry's sermon the second weekend, though, Melanie spontaneously decided that it was time for her to get back to work. She said that she missed it, and wanted to see if she could get a new contract. So when business hours started on Monday morning, she called Osman Creative and asked to be set up for an interview.

Since McKnight had left an open request for Melanie, that was where Osman told her to go. With a mission to complete, she seemed confident that she could handle whatever it was they needed her to do, and set out for a lunch meeting in Bellevue.

After she left, it struck Barry that this was the first time he recalled ever seeing her go on an interview or to meet a client without first touching up the rust and gold in her hair. When he asked her about it, she just made a face. She didn't understand why she'd done it in the first place. Her hair was fine the way it was.

The phone rang. It was Osman. "Listen, Barry," he said, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Sure, Burt. What do you need?"

"Several of my contractors are concerned about the kind of thing that you and Melanie are going through, and we've scheduled a teleconference for a few minutes from now."

Barry was quiet for a moment. "What do they want?"

"That's the thing," Osman said, "I'm not sure. From what you've told me, it's just a case of overwork, isn't it?"

"As far as I know," Barry lied.

"Well, since you've got experience helping with negotiations, I was wondering if you could keep us on track."

"Sure."

"Great!" Osman said. "Hold on a minute while I add us to the meeting."

As it turned out, the other contractors were concerned about having any costs associated with the problem covered by the company's health insurance policy. Since Barry had become active in the newsgroup's discussion, he knew far more about how other people were handling the problem than anyone else on the call.

"From what I've found out," he said, "there really isn't any treatment beyond taking some time off. That's what Melanie did, and today she's out on a contract interview."

"But," one of the contractors said gravely, "is she better? Has she shaken it off?"

Barry shrugged. "She seems to be okay." But then silently added, "Unless you really know her, that is."

"Besides," Osman said, "you all know that I don't mind if you have to take some time off to decompress between contracts. When you start a new contract rested, you're more efficient. I'll tell you what. If it turns out that there is some kind of treatment, schedule another conference. If the treatment isn't covered, we can discuss a way to handle it, even if the insurance company won't touch it. Keeping the best contractors is worth that expense."

Barry flinched at a muffled shriek from outside. A moment later, the front door flew open and Melanie stormed in. He quickly muted the phone.

"The nerve of that man!" she yelled. "Treating me like some kind of idiot just because I didn't understand all the technical stuff right off the bat!"

In a brief lull, while Melanie was too busy tearing off her jacket and throwing it on the floor to continue her outburst, Barry reengaged the mike and hastily exited the discussion.

"What happened?" he asked her, still holding the phone.

She breathed heavily. "I really don't know. One minute McKnight was overjoyed that I could help him, and the next he was pushing me out the door."

"I don't understand," Barry said gently, guiding her to the couch. "Take it from the beginning. Tell me everything that happened."

"Well," she sniffed, "when I first walked in, he said he had a big chocolate mess on his hands. I didn't see anything, and I told him so."

Barry sat beside her. "Then what?"

"We went into the conference room, and one of his partners handed me some press releases to read. It was something about time-release capsules and a customer of theirs, PanAgra."

"Yeah," Barry said. "Osman told me they were doing some job for PanAgra a couple of weeks ago."

"Well, it was pretty technical, and they wanted me to start writing a white paper about it, right then and there. I mean, really. How do they expect me to do that when I haven't had a chance to figure out what the thing even said?"

Barry nodded. "So what did you do?"

"What do you think I did? I asked for some time to get up to speed, maybe a day or two. And that's when he exploded. Like it was my fault that I needed some time off or something. When I objected, he grabbed the folder back and ordered me to leave. Oh, I feel awful, Barry. What am I

going to do? How am I going to get work?"

"Shhhh," he said, gently stroking her hair, and rocking her like a troubled child.

As he sat there comforting her, Barry's thought about a young mother's recent posting in the newsgroup. When she discovered that her daughter, who until then had been an honor student, was somehow transformed into the kind of disinterested teenager that she previously avoided, she first turned to her doctor, and then to her church.

'I am so relieved to have someone to talk to about this,' she'd written.

'My daughter, Iris, was always a gregarious person. Even in kindergarten, you could tell there was something special going on in that pretty little head. After grade school, she spent her evenings and weekends devouring books, and exploring what lay beyond the curriculum. By the time she started her junior year, she'd already staked out the direction of her life. She'd chosen a major for college, and started learning everything she could about it, even though graduation was over a year away.'

'Well, that all changed last week. Just like loved ones in your own lives, my daughter just sort of stopped being herself. I didn't see it happen, but I can certainly tell the difference. Where before, her life was filled with a welter of different interests, now she can only focus on one thing at a time, and even then she's easily distracted.'

'I took her to see our doctor. Boy was that ever a waste of time. He said she was just working too hard at school, that I should give her some time to recover and hope for the best. Right. When I objected, and told him again about the changes in her personality, he blew me off and gave me the number for a psychiatrist he knows. I was so frustrated. I nearly lost it, right there and then. For some reason, he's either unwilling or unable to accept the possibility that something is seriously wrong, something that he doesn't know anything about. Anyway, I told him where he could shove his bill, and stormed out.'

'Sunday, after church, I took her in to see the priest. Big mistake. While I was looking for the inner strength to find a way to help my daughter, the priest was more interested in using Iris's condition to support the church's ready-made theological diagnosis. Faced with the spectre of a public prayer vigil, and the effects it would have on both my family and my daughter, I refused his assistance and returned home.'

'So I asked myself how Iris would have approached the problem, and started searching on the Internet. That's how I found this newsgroup. After I'd read a few of the case postings, I knew I'd found the right place.'

'Here's what I want to do. I started this new discussion thread to talk about what's really going on. Not reports about who's been affected, or what they were doing at the time, but what's behind it. What we do in dealing with it every day can be handled elsewhere. This discussion is for digging behind the surface, for learning more about the cause of our shared problem. I'm certain that if we work together, if we put the shreds of truth that many of us may be holding together, that maybe we can discover the reason for it, or at least to find better ways to understand it.'

'I realized something important this morning. The doctors and the priests are both too wrapped up in their own little worlds to care much about ours, and about the people whose lives have been shattered by the effects of this burnout fever, or whatever it might be. If we're going to lick this thing, we're going to have to do it ourselves.'

Barry traced Melanie's pentagram necklace with a fingertip. 'Burnout Fever,' he thought. 'Well, at least now it has a name.'

This was good, because in the magical world of a pagan like Barry, knowing its name meant that it could be controlled. And that meant it could be beaten.

Chapter Six

Driving to the University of Washington was the furthest thing from Barry's mind when he woke up the following morning. Melanie had kept him up most of the night, worrying about having lost the contract with McKnight, and terrified that Burt Osman would fire her when he found out what had happened. After staring at the clock until a number changed, he slipped quietly out of bed, careful not to disturb whatever fitful sleep she was getting, and got dressed in the living room.

An email arrived while he was reading the latest newsgroup posts. It was entitled, 'Burnout Fever Research.' According to Leslie Omak, the grad student who had written him, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had enlisted the assistance of researchers across the country in their effort to learn more about what they had officially dubbed Burnout Fever. UW had assigned her an office, and she wanted to speak with him.

Melanie wandered out just as he was finishing the most recent post in the Iris thread, so he made some breakfast while she fiddled with the radio. Once she was settled in with a station that didn't seem to disturb her, he grabbed his coat and left.

* * *

Barry was about to grab the doorknob when he noticed a hand-lettered sign: Project Iris. He studied it for a moment, and felt the energy inherent in its creation. Iris, the girl who had inspired her mother to reject the opaque wisdom of her church and instigate a search for answers.

He lowered his hand and took a breath. In his world, life offered the basis for events of mystical significance, but it was up to us to choose whether to make use of it. Although Omak had merely asked him to drop by to chat, for Barry it was also an invitation to step onto a path leading to events and experiences different from those in his past. For him, recognizing that significance, walking through that doorway as if it was a portal to another dimension, turned the act into a magical ceremony.

"Mr. Lieber?"

He looked to his left, where Omak stood reading a sheet of paper, and smiled. "Barry will do."

"Barry, then," she said. "I'm glad you could come." She nodded towards the small table near the back wall. "Have a seat."

While Barry got comfortable, she grabbed a folder from the top of a filing cabinet and set it down between them. "Did you have any trouble finding my office?"

He chuckled. "Not nearly as much trouble as I had getting through the traffic out there."

"Why?" she asked as she took her seat. "What's going on?"

"Have you seen what happens when someone gets Burnout Fever?" He shook his head. "I don't know about anyone else, but when Melanie got it, she just sort of froze for a while, and then her focus narrowed way down. That's not exactly the description of a good driver."

She closed her eyes briefly and nodded. "I know. My brother Hal was nearly killed that way."

He drew a sharp breath. "Has he got it? Burnout Fever, I mean?"

"Last week," she said, her eyes focusing somewhere behind him, "he was coming home from a tech conference in San Francisco. It was a night flight, one of the commuter runs. I guess the pilot took ill, because when it was time to descend..."

Barry studied her face while waiting for her to continue. He could tell that she was still working through her reaction to the incident, still coming to grips with a future that almost happened.

"Well," she said quietly, "they flew right through Seattle airspace without joining the traffic pattern. The controllers at SeaTac cleared a path for them, tried to coach the pilot, but he was too busy watching the clouds below in the moonlight to respond."

Barry exhaled consciously. "What did they do? How did they get the plane down?"

Leslie closed her eyes. "Sheer luck, I think. One of their other pilots was in the window seat next to Hal, probably on a vacation trip or something, and she could tell that something was wrong. The flight crew tried to calm everyone while they explained the situation to her. Anyway, she went into the cabin, and got the plane turned back towards the airport."

"Scary. I guess your brother must be wary of planes after that."

She nodded. "And from what you say, I might want to stay off the roads as well. Look, I

wanted to talk to you about how you can help us.”

“Sure, anything. What did you have in mind?”

“Well,” she said tentatively, “I read your posts in the newsgroup.”

He gestured towards the door. “And I see you took an interest in the Iris discussion.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Considering how that one post galvanized the group, got it focused on understanding what’s really going on, I decided to follow suit and name my team here after her.”

“How can I help?”

“You seem to have a good feel for process,” she said, laying her hand down on the folder between them. “I started a database when I read your quick assessment of the range of people and locations involved. Some folks at the CDC had done the same, but soon realized that there wasn’t any good way to track the spread of this thing. That’s why they’ve asked for help. Until people know what to report, and the medical community knows what to do about it, a good many cases are likely to miss being reported. And since the first step towards understanding this is to get information about it, we need to begin by setting up ways to collect that data.”

“And so?”

She took a long breath. “You’ve seen onset, and from what I’ve read on your website, you also have relationships with people in a variety of organizations from your work as a negotiator and a facilitator. We’ll need to get inside those places if we ever hope to learn about the effects of whatever this is. Considering what Hal went through, I’m pretty sure there’s a lot we don’t know about, and some of it may present risks to the general public.”

Barry huffed. “Or to the planet. Imagine if someone with a first-strike launch sequence got Burnout Fever. What then?”

She nodded gravely. “You see my point, then.”

“I tell you what. I’m going to speak with the brass at some of the organizations I work with, and see if I can convince them to give us a hand. Since they have a lot at stake, they ought to give us information about who’s been affected, and we can follow up from there.”

“We could also use some money,” she added.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He tapped the folder. “So what’s in here?”

“Oh, right,” she said, amused. “It’s some research I’ve started. The CDC tapped me because of my work on neuroanatomy. I’ve been trying to isolate the biochemical side of this thing, to see which parts of the brain are affected. When you start with a non-specific change of behavior, you really can’t point at something as the culprit. What I’m hoping to do is develop a profile from what’s been reported so far. Well, it’s a starting point, anyway. Speaking of which, how’s your wife doing?”

Barry thought for a moment. “Not good. She had a job interview yesterday, a return engagement really, and she made a mess of it. It’s not her fault, of course, but in her state, she doesn’t see that. What sleep she did get was interrupted by a recurring memory of the interview. I’m not clear on whether it was a dream, a nightmare, or what. Whatever it was, though, kept her from getting much rest. When I left, she was listening to a radio talk show. For some reason, she seems able to deal with radio better than TV.”

“Well,” Leslie said uncomfortably, “I shouldn’t keep you away for longer than necessary, then. Thanks for coming down.”

The trip back to West Seattle was a real eye opener. Now that he’d been alerted to the potential danger sharing the road with him, Barry changed from merely being a defensive driver to a truly paranoid one. He gave people extra room to maneuver, watched for signs of erratic behavior, and didn’t rely on others to do simple things like noticing traffic signals or stop signs as much as he used to.

Melanie was in the kitchen when he got home, sitting at the table and surrounded with what must have been an armload of magazines, bottles, and tubes. She still had the radio on, and the host was berating a caller for complaining about having lost his job.

“Well, if you’re just going to sit around and complain about it,” the host said, “then I suppose maybe you deserve losing that job. Haven’t you ever heard of retraining? People do it all the time.”

“You don’t understand,” the caller whined, “it’s my own job! Why would I need to get retrained to do the same thing I’ve been doing for the last five years? It doesn’t make any sense!”

"I'll tell you what makes sense," Melanie told the radio, "doing something about it." When she saw Barry, she flipped the radio off. "I got some stuff at the store while you were out."

"So I see," he said, pulling a chair out so he could join her. "What did you get?"

She tapped one of the magazines, a supermarket tabloid with a headline that read, 'End-time Plague Hits World.' "I normally don't read these things, but they seem to have changed lately. There's a good article about the plague, and what you can do about it."

He glanced at the paraphernalia littering the table. "And all this?"

"Cures," she said, "or at least treatments."

He picked up one of the bottles and read the label. It might have claimed to be a cure, but all it contained was garlic extract and some vitamin powder. The rest of them also contained random collections of ingredients, and wore labels intended to convince people that there was a treatment, if not a cure, for whatever this thing was. Evidently, the hucksters of the world saw this only as a way to squeeze money out of people who no longer could make the distinction between these empty promises and what they got for their money.

"But why?" he asked.

She looked at him incredulously. "You have to ask? After what happened yesterday? I don't know what's going on, Barry, but unless I do something about it, I'm not going to be able to get another contract."

He scooted his chair closer and put an arm around her. "It'll be okay, Mel. I spoke to someone down at UW today. They're looking into it already, and pretty soon they'll have a real cure, one that works."

She sniffed, and looked around at all the stuff she'd bought. "But what about all these?"

"Don't worry," he said hopefully, "the CDC is working on it. If they find something, I'll know."

Chapter Seven

When Barry returned home on Thursday afternoon, he set an MP3 player, a pile of cassette tapes, and a small cassette recorder on the coffee table.

Melanie looked up from her pad. "What's all this?"

"A job," he said, sitting beside her.

She leaned over to read the label on one of the tapes. "'Bob Rhodes'? Who's that?"

Barry bit his lip. "An engineer with the same thing you've got. I've gotten several area businesses to help collect data for Project Iris. These are interviews with family members about employees of those businesses who have contracted Burnout Fever."

"So what's the job, then?"

He fingered the Rhodes tape. "Before we can make use of the information, someone first has to transcribe the interviews. Once they're in text form, the team over at UW can characterize the descriptions, extract data, and do some statistical analysis."

Melanie shook her head. "I don't get it. Isn't there software for that?"

"Well, yeah," Barry said, waving the cassette in thought. "Thing is, that would only get the words. A lot of what's being described is pretty fuzzy, so we'd also like to know how they said stuff. Do you think you can handle that?"

She eyed it suspiciously. "I don't know."

"How about this. Let's take a listen to one of them, and you can tell me what you think." He opened the cassette case, popped the tape into the portable recorder, and pressed play.

The recorded room echoed hollowly for a time. Then, after an abrupt clunk, came a sound like the microphone being moved. "This, uh, this is Alan Rhodes," said a tentative teenage voice. "Bob's my older brother. We were shooting baskets in the driveway after dinner when it happened. He was setting up for a foul shot at the time, and I was razzing him about his new girlfriend. Gina's an artist, you

see, and she did some of the characters for a new game. Thing is, one of them looks suspiciously like Bob. Anyway, to make a long story short, since this 'virtual Bob' is pretty much cannon fodder, I've been finding creative ways to off him in the game. He didn't like that much, and was reeling off all kinds of torture scenarios he wanted to try just as soon as he got Gina to put me in a game."

There was a long pause. "That's when it happened," Alan's reedy voice continued. "One minute he was happily describing some tech version of a rack, and... and the next he was standing there with his mouth hanging open, staring at the basket like it had just turned into a lizard or something. His hands shook for a few seconds, and then he just sort of lowered them. The ball slipped out and I had to run after it. It was weird, like he forgot he was even holding the thing."

"Bob's been pretty strange since then. The doc said he should take some time off work, but as far as I can tell, it didn't do much good. My folks insisted that he stay with us for a while, and for the first few weeks, it seemed like he was getting better. At least that's what it looked like to me. But then he went back to work, and now he's on some sort of leave. I guess his boss wasn't convinced. In any case, all he seems to want to do any more is read stuff about medieval torture chambers, like he's gotten stuck on our last conversation or something. I don't know."

Barry punched stop and looked at Melanie. She'd picked up her pad, and was paging through it. "Do you know why I've been drawing these?" she asked.

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head. "Not really. They're just always on my mind, that's all."

"Why do you ask? Was it something on the tape?"

"Yeah." Melanie sat back and studied the pad. "I think it's like Bob's thing about torture chambers. It's what he was talking about at the time."

"I was hoping you'd notice that," Barry said gently. "We were out watching McQuarry when you..."

"Angels," she said. "He was talking about angels. Does it mean something?"

Barry nodded. "Probably, but the folks at the UW are going to need more evidence before they can draw any conclusions. So what do you think? Are you up to it?"

She leaned forward and carefully placed the pad on the table before answering. "I guess so. Is it for pay?"

"Surprisingly, yes," he said, warming to the discussion. "The companies I've spoken with so far understand what will happen to their bottom line if someone doesn't find a cure. They've agreed to help fund the UW research effort and that includes transcribing interviews."

Melanie put her hand over the cassette recorder. "One thing, though."

"What?"

She tapped it a few times. "You said they wanted more than just the words."

"Um-hmm. What about it?"

"I'm not sure I understand. What else is there?"

"It's, um..." He closed his eyes and took a slow breath. "It's not that important. Just the words will be fine."

Melanie smiled for the first time in days. With a straightforward task to perform, and the prospect of being paid for doing it, she happily scooped up all the stuff that Barry had brought in, and started talking to herself about what she'd be doing, and how valuable her assistance would be to the research team.

Barry watched as she walked purposefully into the den, and closed the door behind her. Relieved at the prospect of having found the kind of work she could handle, he grabbed his laptop, flipped open the lid, and got back to reading posts on the newsgroup.

A side discussion had sprouted from the original Iris thread. A software tester who had until then lurked in the shadows, reading the discussions but not participating, suggested that it was possible to characterize the change in personality caused by Burnout Fever as an inability to easily change context.

"A computer's operating system," he wrote, "like a juggler, has to keep a number of balls in the air at once."

“To do this, they both keep changing the focus of their attention. For the juggler, it means handling the coordination required to catch and throw each ball in turn. For the operating system, it means executing a section of program code for your word processor, say, and then some for working with the hard disk or for the display.”

“When it all works properly, these rapid changes of context can be ignored. The juggler can engage his audience in discussion, and the writer can concentrate on driving his story to the next crisis. I’ve been reading these discussions for a while now, and it strikes me that the initial characterization of the effects as being like job burnout was right on the mark.”

“I had a bout of actual job burnout a few years ago. When it hit, I found that although I could still do a lot of things I’d done before, I had to change how I did them. When I drove my car, for instance, I had to consciously remind myself to look in the mirror. That’s normally something I wouldn’t even think about.”

“So, I suggest that consciousness can be thought of like a juggler or an operating system. When I’m feeling fine, I’ve got what feels like about seven mental processes running all the time. Think of it like a juggler with seven balls. Some of them are basic things for interacting with the environment, but a few are the kind of thing that gives a person depth. You could say that these processes are what enable people to see humor or insights. They’re the things that stop working when you have a real case of job burnout, and I think the same thing happens with Burnout Fever.”

Barry looked up from his laptop, and considered the writer’s point. For him, it was like the series of seven mystical Chakras, or energy nexus points, that we each carry around. The bottom one represents the root source of life energy, and the rest build on top of that to layer other aspects of our being on it, things like emotion, intellect and spirituality. He thought about the changes he’d seen in Melanie, and it seemed to make sense. In a way, it was if the effect of those higher Chakras, of those discarded mental processes, was to add harmonics and overtones to the strong bass note of a person’s core self.

He glanced at the closed den door briefly, and then let his gaze drift back across the room to the coffee table, where he noticed that Melanie had left her sketchpad. He picked it up and leafed through it. The first few pages had crude renderings of the kind of angel depicted in conventional religious art. They had the typical bright, beatific expressions, feathered wings and Hollywood-style robes which Melanie used to find so annoying -- the kind of image suggested by McQuarry’s vague descriptions of the perfect world in which they allegedly lived.

They started to change after that. It was so subtle at first that he had to flip back and forth between a few of the sketches before he was certain, but there was clearly a difference in the expressions she drew. The eyes were just a bit narrower in the fourth sketch, a change that, for Barry, made the angel seem more real, more likely to actually have some sort of a life, more likely to have had the depth of experience needed to give rise to the kind of wisdom or insights that McQuarry attributed to them. Their smiles started changing in the sixth sketch, and their wings and robes in the ninth. By the tenth sheet, Melanie was drawing what looked like a very troubled character from some sort of fantasy world where winged people lived, and in the twelfth she started adding detail to the backgrounds.

He lowered the pad and stared out the window for a moment, then raised it again and flipped to the most recent sketch she’d done. If it depicted an angel at all, only the bedraggled wings gave that fact away. The creature’s eyes and cheeks were hollow, an effect she’d enhanced by smudging the pencil marks. It looked like it hadn’t had a decent meal for days, and judging from the stains on its robe and wings, as if it had recently been mugged. The wings drooped so low that their bottom edges fell off the page. It wasn’t looking straight out of the picture as the others had, but instead seemed to be watching something behind Barry’s right shoulder, watching with an apprehensive expression. She’d set this character in what looked like the courtyard of some sort of building. There were some bushes lining a walkway in the background, but she’d drawn them with bits of branch sticking out, rather than simply covered with foliage. Most startling of all was something she hadn’t finished, the beginnings of what looked like a reflection of something in one of the windows of the building, a reflection shaped like a person.

Barry dropped the pad and closed his eyes to think. If the software tester was right, then

when Melanie was struck with Burnout Fever during McQuarry's sermon, she immediately lost several of what he'd described as processes, eliminating some of the texture and depth from her personality. What remained, the core of her consciousness, focused on what lay before her, McQuarry's description of angels. That would explain her fascination with them. It would also explain why the pilot of the plane that Leslie Omak's brother was on just sat in the cockpit watching the clouds, and why Bob Rhodes developed a fixation on torture chambers.

But what about the way Melanie's sketches had changed? He rose and walked to the door, then turned around and frowned at the pad on the coffee table. She'd started with a good rendition of McQuarry's hypothetical angels, but then they started to change, to deteriorate. When he thought about the sequence of sketches in that way, Barry wondered whether it was simply a matter of the crystal idea she'd taken from the sermon getting lost amid her preoccupation with her job situation, that perhaps it was just her way of expressing how she felt about herself.

The thought of self-reflection brought him back to her final sketch, and the odd reflection that she'd introduced into the scene. "What was that about," he muttered, "and whom did it represent?"

Physically shaking off the growing sense of unwarranted mystery, he glanced at the den door and wondered about the context switching theory again. If that was what was going on, he mused, then it ought to be possible to confirm or disprove the theory. Melanie's reaction to McKnight's chocolate joke certainly supported the idea. So how about testing the theory?

He shrugged, and walked towards the den. As he approached, he could hear the sound of a taped interview being started over and over, each time moving a bit further into the recorded event. He knocked, and then opened the door. Melanie turned to look at him.

"Um," he said, not certain of how to proceed. "I'd... like to ask you something."

She paused the tape and waited for him to pull up a chair.

"Remember your meeting with Julian McKnight?" he asked carefully.

She nodded. "Sure. Why?"

"I'm curious about what he said to you, that comment about having a chocolate mess on his hands."

She blinked a few times. "What about it?"

Barry thought for a moment. "Did you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"Well..." She squirmed. "When he just walked up and hit me with that, I didn't have the faintest clue what he meant. I thought he was talking about what he said he was talking about, chocolate on his hands. But when I looked, it wasn't true. His hands were clean. Not a bit of chocolate on them."

She'd lowered her face, so Barry reached out and tipped it back up with a finger under her chin. He looked into her eyes. "How did that make you feel?"

"How do you think I felt? I was annoyed by the fact that he'd lied to me, but I really needed the job, so I tried to not let it bother me."

"That was a good thing to do," he said calmly. "What did you say his writing job was about?"

Melanie gazed past his right shoulder for a moment. "Some protests over a candy bar. Why?"

"A candy bar," he echoed. "Was it chocolate?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

He tapped his lips a few times in thought. "So, could his problem be described as... a chocolate mess?"

She shrugged. "Sure. I suppose."

Barry was a bit afraid of asking the next question. "Could that be what he meant?"

"Meant by what?"

He took a breath. "By having a chocolate mess on his hands."

Melanie slumped. "Why would it? His hands were clean. I just told you that. Look what's this about anyway?"

"Nothing," he said, and bit his lip. "It's not important. I was just curious, that's all."

"Good," she said. "Now can I get back to work?"

Barry nodded. "Look, I have an errand downtown. Will you be okay?"

"Sure. I've got plenty to do here, anyway. Have a good time."

Barry smiled at the unintended irony, grabbed a jacket, and headed for the door. Considering how dangerous the roads had gotten lately, he hardly considered the drive to UW a good time. If the ever-controversial light rail system was ever finished, he'd easily prefer using it over risking his life against the possibility of some driver suddenly dropping to DOS and crashing something a bit

more substantial than a computer. If he took a bus, at least it would survive having someone smash a car into it, but even a bus wasn't guaranteed to win in a disagreement with a truck. And there was still the possibility that the bus driver might get Burnout Fever.

He was still mulling over the choice of transportation while he locked the door and turned to face the street. Sasha, wearing her usual bright orange cycling sweats, had dismounted and was walking her bike along the sidewalk. Barry crossed the yard towards her and waved.

"Where's Clive?" he asked.

She studied him briefly before answering. "Burnout Fever."

"Is he okay?"

"Not really," she said. "He got it while we were on a busy street, and drove into traffic."

Barry frowned. "Was he hit?"

"Fortunately, no. But when he grabbed the support frame on a truck's mirror and tried to steal a ride, he lost his balance and rode into a parked car."

"Ouch. Did he break anything?"

She nodded. "His right leg."

He patted the handlebar of her bicycle. "So how come you're on foot today?"

She took a breath, and looked back at the street behind her. "I thought I'd be okay, but after a few minutes, I just didn't feel comfortable riding. It's become harder to share the road with drivers. There's a lot of people out there who've gotten this thing, but continue to drive anyway."

Barry shrugged. "But what other choice do they have?"

"I know," she said. "It's going to get worse, though. Then what?"

"I wish I knew. Thanks."

Standing there on the sidewalk, watching Sasha walk her bike for fear of the danger of riding it in traffic, Barry made his decision. Choosing a course of action out of fear, rather than from intention, drastically changed the dynamic of life. It put you in the role of reactor, a passive pawn in a game played by someone else, someone with power over you. It was a curious thought, though, because Barry's spiritual world was a dynamic balance, a blending of active and passive principles, neither of which could exist in isolation. If the effects of Burnout Fever altered that balance, if what he just saw was a microcosm of a larger picture, then the ultimate effects of the malady could, in time, have devastating effects on the world. Not wanting to contribute energy to that distasteful, but potential, future, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to his car. If making choices, even hazardous ones, led to his death, at least it would be at his own hand, and he would end this incarnation still striving for life, instead of merely watching it go by.

Barry spent the drive to UW wondering what effect Burnout Fever would have on the effort to do something about it. Losing a single critical researcher could cause a major setback unless everything was carefully recorded, including the researcher's private thoughts about the direction of the research, and their musings about its meaning. The chances of that happening, it seemed, were as small as the chance that McQuarry knew the secret of life.

As he walked down the hallway to Leslie Omak's office, Barry listened for signs of whether Burnout Fever was getting in the way of whatever work was going on. One or two people were getting instruction on office procedures, but there was no way to know if that was due to normal staff turnover, or the loss of some team member to the malady. The handwritten sign was missing when he reached the door, and a heated argument was going on inside. Reluctant to just barge in, he knocked a few times and waited.

A moment later, the argument stopped, and the door opened. Omak stood there for a while, breathing heavily. Then she glanced over her shoulder, motioned him to come inside, and shut the door behind him.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The other person in the room, a heavyset man in an ill-fitting brown sport jacket, eyed him briefly. "Who are you?"

"Barry Lieber," he said. "I'm helping Ms Omak with Project Iris."

The man shook the hand-lettered sign. "There is no Project Iris."

Omak crossed her arms and sneered at him. "We were asked to support the CDC's effort to study this thing. Just because that might expose the university to scrutiny is no reason to ignore them!"

"Wait a minute, both of you," Barry said forcefully, holding up both hands. "I'm a negotiator, and you two seem to have some sort of problem."

"You bet we do," the man spat. "For one thing, Ms Omak here seems to have appropriated

university resources without permission. And for another—”

“Permission?” Omak shrieked. “You know perfectly well that researchers have permission to use unoccupied office space in their facility.”

He snarled. “Only if the research is approved first!”

Barry opened the door again and slammed it loudly. The sudden noise silenced them both.

“Do I have your attention now?”

They stared at him as if he’d just become visible.

He looked at each in turn. “I said I’m a negotiator. Now, do you want to solve this dispute, or not?”

They nodded.

“Good. Now sit. Both of you.”

While the combatants sat uncomfortably across from one another at the small table, Barry pulled a third chair over and sat between them, facing the wall. “May I have that sign, please?” Reluctantly, the man complied. “Okay. Let’s start by explaining who we are, and why we are here. You first.”

He spent enough time loosening his tie and unbuttoning his collar that Barry guessed he was composing a speech. “My name is Hector Mallory. I’m the campus facilities manager. It’s my job to make sure that university resources are not being misused.”

“Misused, my ass!” Omak said sharply.

“Quiet.” Barry said tightly, and then turned to look at her. “Now it’s your turn. Who are you, and why are you here?”

“I already told you. I’m Leslie Omak, and I’m conducting research for the CDC.”

“Over my dead body,” Mallory said under his breath.

Barry turned slowly, a look of grim determination on his face.

“All right.”

He tapped the sign between them, and turned back towards Omak. “Were you authorized to conduct this research?”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“Then why are you doing it? Why are you here?”

Omak sat back. “Didn’t we already discuss this? I told you about my brother. What do you really want to know, anyway?”

He glanced at Mallory, and then looked again at Omak. “I want to know what each of you has at stake here. It’s the context for starting a negotiation between you. What I’ve heard is that Mr. Mallory represents the context within which you want to conduct important research for the CDC, and that doing so entails acquiring authorization. Have I got that right so far?”

“Essentially,” Mallory said.

“Good. How can she get this authorization?”

Mallory balled his fist. “That’s not the point! She stole this office. It was—”

“I stole nothing,” Omak retorted.

Barry pointed a finger at each of them. “Stop!” He looked at Mallory. “Unless you intend to file criminal charges, I suggest that you think very seriously about what you’ll accept as a solution to this. We can’t change what’s already happened. The research has already begun, and I came here to report some progress. Now it can either continue under the auspices of the university, or it will continue elsewhere, and I’ll make sure that some of your major donors find out that you told the CDC to go take a hike.”

He then turned towards Omak. “As for you, how do you think anything you might discover would be accepted if it came out that you weren’t supported by the university? You might as well put fake credentials in a research paper. It might work for a while, but when the truth comes out, everything you say and do will be scoffed at. It’s not exactly the best way to establish your credibility.”

He picked up the sign. “The way I see it, you both need this to be real. Okay, I’ve had my say. What are you going to do?”

“Well,” Mallory said, studying Omak, “if you’ll agree to some rules, and file the paperwork, I’ll issue you an actual office, one that’s on the campus directory.”

“Okay,” she said, “as long as I get to keep that name.”

Once the two were reconciled to their respective fates, and Mallory had left to get the paperwork, Barry heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed into one of the chairs. “What set that off?”

“Believe it or not,” she said, amused, “you did.”

“What? How?”

She joined him at the table. “You did such a good job getting support from some of the big corporations around here that when they started sending funds to the UW treasurer for Project Iris, nobody knew where to route it. I guess Mallory drew the short straw. Anyway, thanks for getting that mess straightened out.”

Barry sighed. “You’re welcome. I’m a bit upset, though. After all, you did mislead me.”

She nodded. “Sometimes, it’s the only way to get something started.”

“Maybe so. I’ll have to ask my friend Derek about that.”

“Who’s he?”

Barry smiled. “An old college buddy. Depending on who you ask, he’s either a subversive son-of-a-bitch, or a new world leader.”

“What’s your guess?”

“I think I’ll go with a hybrid: subversive world leader. At the moment he’s scheming with a group called Constitutional Evolution to overhaul the way congress operates.”

She was quiet for a while, and then suddenly looked a question at him. “Didn’t you say you had some news to report?”

He laughed. “Right. I almost forgot. What’s the current thinking on how Burnout Fever affects people?”

“Well,” she said, “I’m still recruiting researchers from various fields, trying to build an interdisciplinary team, so we don’t have all the votes in yet, but the consensus seems to be some sort of general malaise. That’s why you’re out there collecting interviews, so we can find out.”

He smiled. “I did. Now keep in mind that I’m an outsider, and don’t have any background in medicine or psychology.”

She waved him off. “Enough with the self-deprecation. What did you find?”

Barry glanced around the room. “The idea was suggested by a software tester on the newsgroup, and I tested the theory on Melanie.”

“Can you get to the point?”

“All right,” he said, wincing. “It has to do with the ability to switch contexts, to take an idea from one field of thought, and apply it to another. It’s used more than you might think.”

She stared at him for a while before speaking. “Okay. That, at least, gives us a place to start. I’ll spread the word.”

Chapter Eight

Barry clicked the phone off, closed his eyes, and sighed. Behind him, an overcaffeinated customer argued with the barista over a botched order. Once the rant ended, he raised his head and gazed out the sandwich shop window at the hazy outline of the distant Olympics, made further indistinct by the constant drizzle. Pulling his focus back across the Puget Sound to the laptop before him, he added a few comments and moved on to the next name on his list. After listlessly punching up the number, he waited through six rings before someone finally answered.

“It’s Sunday. Leave me alone,” a weary voice said.

“Is that you, Mr. Nguyen? This is Barry Lieber. We spoke the other day about your mother. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, but it’s been hard to get any sleep since she took ill with this Burnout Fever thing.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Nguyen was quiet for a moment. “She keeps hoping for news about it, so she leaves the TV on all the time. All they report, though, are horror stories about accidents caused by it, unfounded rumors about what causes it or how it spreads, and conflicting advice about what to do. The Surgeon General was right: the media’s fascination with fear isn’t making this any easier.”

“I agree. So how have you been dealing with it?”

“I found that if I can get her involved in something else, she calms down for a while, but when we’re finished, she goes right back to it. I’ve cancelled the newspaper subscription already,

and I'm thinking of canceling the cable as well, so she'll have fewer ways to hear about it."

"How did she react to not having the newspaper around?"

"Not well. She walks to the store and buys any magazine with something about it on the cover. I wish they knew what this thing was and how to treat it. As it is, there are so many different so-called treatments that the best advice is just to ignore them all."

Barry shouldered the phone so he could type some notes. "Maybe so. Do you think that restricting her access to news will help?"

"I really don't know. I thought it was worth finding out, but it's been like trying to dig a hole in mud." He paused briefly. "You didn't say why you've called."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It seems that when the CDC analyzed the new cases from last week, they found that a suspicious number of them happened more or less simultaneously. Your mother was one of them, and we're trying to determine if there was anything common to all of the people in the group."

"Like what? Were they all here in the Seattle area?"

A sudden knocking on the window caught Barry's attention. He looked up from his notes to find Ronnie and Al heading for the door. "No," he told Nguyen, "they're scattered around the globe."

"Then what could they have in common?"

"Almost anything," Barry said, while watching Ronnie step inside. "With air travel and consumer goods distributed worldwide, they aren't ruling anything out."

"So what can I tell you that might help?"

"Actually," Barry said, "I'd like you to make a list of the places she's been, the people she may have spoken with, and the foods she's eaten for the past few weeks. I gave you my email and FAX last time, so just send the list to me when you can. If we need more, we'll get back to you. Okay?"

"Sure. I can do that."

He nodded. "Thank you, then, Mr. Nguyen. I hope your mother feels better soon, and that you get some rest. Bye."

Al glanced through the window, and sat blocking the view. A moment later Ronnie walked over and set out a round of hot chocolates.

"Thanks."

"We haven't seen you down here since, um..." Ronnie said as he pulled his chair in.

"Since Melanie 'dropped to DOS,' I think was how Al put it," Barry said, cupping his hands around the drink. "Yeah. I've been keeping a close eye on her since then."

"How's she doing?" Al asked.

"Better than she was at first. Once I figured out the rules, I adapted our routine."

"Rules?" Ronnie smiled. "Why, did you have to reboot her or something?"

"Don't laugh," Barry chided him. "Just because I don't write software like you two doesn't mean I can't use your metaphors. As it turns out, one of them was right on the mark."

Al chuckled. "Oh?"

"Yeah. A tester on the Burnout Fever newsgroup suggested that the effects, whatever they are, prevent people with it from easily switching contexts. I did a quick experiment on Melanie, and he seems to be right."

"Ouch," Ronnie said. "That pretty much rules out puns, doesn't it?"

Barry nodded. "And from what the roads look like these days, it also makes driving with a cell phone especially dangerous. But more importantly, it means that if you have Burnout Fever, you lose the ability to generalize, because that entails taking information about specific events and applying it to the concept that holds the group together. An awful lot depends on that ability."

The uncomfortable silence that followed was finally broken when Al cleared his throat. "So... where's Mel?"

"Home. She's become fixated on McQuarry's angels. She's drawn a deteriorating succession of them, and surrounds herself with them during the guy's sermons. Last week, he went on about how much trouble we've been giving them by not paying enough attention to their nagging. This time, I decided to let her watch him on her own. He should be finishing up soon."

Ronnie gestured at the clutter on the table. "What's all this?"

"I'm helping the research effort over at UW, doing follow-up on some people who all came down with the thing at the same time. The CDC folks are trying to isolate whatever causes Burnout Fever, looking for how it's spread."

"Do they think it's viral?" Ronnie said. "It might be environmental, you know."

"Here's an odd thought," Al said offhandedly. "What if it's spread by some kind of memetic virus? I mean, if it affects the way people think, couldn't it be carried like an idea?"

"If it is," Barry said, "it'd probably be the first. I'll ask around."

At that moment, the door slammed open and Melanie burst in. "Barry!" she cried, and ran to him.

Ronnie and Al quickly got out of the way while Barry rose to see what the matter was. Melanie hadn't bothered to put a jacket on, and was shivering from the cold, water dripping from her clothes. "What's wrong, Mel?"

He put his arms around her and silently asked Ronnie to hand him his jacket, which had been draped over the back of his chair.

"He said I'm damned!" Melanie sobbed, a frightened expression contorting her face.

"Who?" Barry asked, holding her tightly. "Who did?"

It took her a few moments to calm down enough to get an answer out. By the time she did, the others in the shop had gathered around to see what had upset her so badly. "Wilfred," she said, still choking on her breath. "Reverent McQuarry. He said the angels are marking people for damnation!"

"What?"

"He said the ones they've given up on — people like me — are gonna be sent to hell first."

"What do you mean 'first'?"

"First," she said, eyes red from crying. "Before the Rapture!"

"Wait a minute," Barry said, struggling for calm. "McQuarry thinks the Rapture is starting, and that people with Burnout Fever are getting tossed in hell for an appetizer? What's wrong with that guy?"

"Oh, my God," one of the other customers said as she grabbed her coat and headed for the door. "I knew it! I knew the end times were here. I just knew it."

"What are they talking about?" Ronnie quietly asked Al.

While Barry attempted to calm Melanie with assurances that McQuarry was wrong, Al took his partner aside and gave him the short version of the Christian book of Revelations, albeit in a particularly theatrical rendition. When he was finished describing the end of the world, Ronnie stood there silently, with a worried look on his face.

"And McQuarry thinks Burnout Fever is part of that?"

Melanie turned to look at him. "Yes. And that you and Al are next."

"That's it," Barry said sharply. "Something's got to be done about that guy. Let's go."

Chapter Nine

"Not really," Melissa Fox said, grinning broadly. "In fact, they contacted my dad about it."

Derek watched the last of the runners disappear around the first corner, then turned back to her and shrugged. "However it happened, I'm sure the research center will be thrilled."

Losing the primary sponsor only weeks before this year's 10K fund-raiser for the Northern Virginia Neurological Institute had sent Melissa's dad, who represented the NVNI's district in Congress, into a flurry of schmoozing. Then, after almost two weeks of unsuccessful meetings and phone calls, Arthur Fox got an unexpected surprise. The marketing director for DuraBar, a favorite among the runners, visited his office. He said that he'd heard what had happened, and wondered if it was too late to change the name and logo on all of the promotional materials. He also offered to supply free nutrition bars, not only for the runners, but for the crowd as well. It was a deal made in heaven.

Derek pulled a DuraBar from his pocket and peered at the label. "I don't know. Considering all the protests about the GMOs used to make these things, you'd think they'd be reluctant to associate themselves with PanAgra."

"Actually..." Melissa paused, glancing around to see if anyone could hear her. "I'm more

surprised that my dad was even willing to talk with them. Claiming that he sold out to a multinational would make a pretty juicy item in a campaign debate.”

“On the other hand, you did say that he engaged in situational ethics. He had a problem, and they offered a solution.”

She smirked. “Oh, and I suppose you’d be willing to weaken our proposal for governance if PanAgra offered to ante up for office space or something?”

“Hardly, but we haven’t been elected, either.”

“But that’s all the more reason for him to avoid relationships like that.”

“Relationships like what?” her father whispered from behind her.

Melissa drew in her breath. “Oh. Hi, daddy. I thought you were chatting up the folks from the press.”

He smiled. “I was. So were you planning to introduce us, or what?”

She turned to face him. “Dad, this is Derek Boa. Derek, this is my father, Representative Arthur Fox.”

While the two were shaking hands, Fox said, “I understand you’re behind the grassroots group my daughter has joined.”

“Yes, sir. Constitutional Evolution is working on ways to overhaul the process of legislation. Melissa has been an invaluable source of insights about how the existing system really works.”

“Has she, now,” the congressman said. “Should I be pleased or outraged?”

Derek laughed. “That’s hard to say. She’s both an astute observer, and an insightful analyst. You’re reaction would depend on how you feel about what we’re doing.”

“How do you think I should feel about it?”

“Well, sir, from what she tells me, you’ve had to make some decisions because of the influence of corporate interests. I know that your ability to do the things you want to do in congress are tempered by the need to retain both your office and your own influence. We’re hoping to balance the power of corporate interests with those of the public interest by changing how things are done on the hill. So if you’re serious about what you took office to accomplish, I’d think that you’d be pleased.”

Fox nodded. “I’m certainly pleased to see how well you handle yourself. Considering the dragon you’ve picked a fight with, you’re going to need some practice presenting your case in front of congress. If you intend to challenge something as entrenched as the corporate-governmental power structure, you’ll be fighting objections from both camps.”

“We know that, daddy,” Melissa said. “The question is, how do you feel about it?”

Before her father had a chance to answer, they were interrupted by a tinny rendition of Bob Dylan’s tune, ‘The Times, They are a-Changin’. Derek fished out his cell phone, looked at the caller-ID and clicked it on.

“Hi Barry,” he said. “What’s up?”

Melissa’s smile faded when she saw a troubled frown cross Derek’s face.

His jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.” Then, after a few moments of pained expressions, he said, “Okay, I’ll download it when I get home and call you back.”

“What’s wrong?” Melissa asked as he put the phone away.

He stared at her for a while before answering. “That was Barry Lieber, my old college roommate. He said that a webevangelist named McQuarry just asserted that everyone with Burnout Fever has been marked for damnation as a prelude to the Rapture.”

Fox backed a half step. “What?”

“Yeah. And anyone that isn’t heterosexual goes next.”

Melissa shook her head. “Didn’t we already go down that road about AIDS? Sounds to me an awful lot like screaming ‘fire’ in a crowded theater.” She turned to her father. “I think we’ve got a First Amendment fight brewing over this.”

He nodded. “Not to mention a challenge to his group’s tax free status as a church.”

“Listen,” Derek said to Melissa, “the race is going to take a while, and I have a feeling this thing is going to stir up a hornet’s nest. I’d like to bug out and see what I can find out about this. Do you want to join me, or stay here until I get back?”

She glanced at her father before answering. “I’m with you.”

By the time they drove the twenty minutes home and fired up a web browser, reports of McQuarry’s sermon had already been picked up on the ‘Oddly Enough’ section of the news site he used for a home page. The article was entitled, ‘Web Preacher Diagnoses Burnout.’

‘This morning,’ the piece began, ‘the Reverend Dr. Wilfred McQuarry ventured into the field of medicine, offering yet another diagnosis for the wave of Burnout Fever that has been sweeping the globe. Speaking from a compound near Shasta Lake, California, McQuarry addressed the issue in his weekly webcast sermon. His diagnosis, which has not been confirmed by anyone at the CDC, is that those suffering from it have simply been marked by their Angels for damnation.’

‘Considering that until now, McQuarry has claimed that his Angels are supposed to be there to help us, it is not clear whether we are to believe that the underworld has been transformed into some kind of theme park. If it has, then perhaps we should expect to see ads for packaged tours and family weekends before long.’

There must have been a lot of people trying to see McQuarry’s sermon, because it took quite a while for them to get a response from his web server. Past sermons were available for download, including the one he’d done earlier that day, so Derek started the transfer and they waited. Even with a hot DSL connection, the data stream came in spurts, which probably meant that the server was nearly maxed out. While waiting, they got something to drink and shared his pocketed energy bar.

When at last the video file was ready to play, Derek leaned forward and clicked the start button. As the winged logo faded to McQuarry’s chubby face, Derek blew a breath through his lips and clenched his jaw.

“Good morning,” McQuarry said.

“I’m so happy that you could all join me for today’s sermon. Last time, you’ll recall, we talked about how angry the Angels have gotten because so many of the people they are charged with helping have not responded to their guidance. Today, I’d like to talk about why they are so angry.

“Several weeks ago, we explored the various dramas that have been played out on the human stage over the centuries and across the world. We talked about how each of the various ages we read about in our history books were actually stage managed by the community of Angels assigned to tell that story. This is the reason why the many empires of the past went through periods of growth and decline. It is, in fact, why their stories can actually be told as stories.

“But just as an individual’s life can be told as a story within that larger context, these great stories are also part of an even greater drama, one that takes not decades or centuries to tell, but millennia.

“When an Angel coaches you, the events that you are led through are intended to make of your own life a well-crafted, satisfying story that can be told to your children, and then to their children. A well-crafted life, one that makes a good story, is the ultimate basis of legend. But the shape that your Angel is sculpting for your life is also a part of the larger stories that you are involved in. In the same way, the story of your community and your country, or of your culture, is part of a larger one.

“Today, however, it is the largest of these stories that is the most important, because the arc of that tale is drawing to a close. In order for that far more important tale to be told well, a great many stories of all sizes must come together in just the right way. For this to happen, even the stories of single lives, such as the one that you are living right now, must unfold according to the script. That is the primary concern of the Angels today, and it seems that it is not going well.

“Unfortunately, far too many of those who were to have played small but important parts in the conclusion of that story have chosen to ignore the guidance offered in love by their Angels. Many of these people may not even be aware of this, but it is so. Rather than allow this most important of stories to be harmed, the Angels, in communion with the almighty, have decided to recast the parts.

“This is being accomplished by striking down those who have ignored the guidance of their Angels with a new plague, this so-called Burnout Fever. Rather than being cast in part of the story, these people are being cast into the abyss for their actions, so that the Rapture can begin, as it has long been foretold. Once

these new players have accepted the roles selected by their Angels, the End Days will begin, and the first sign will be the destruction of those among us who live in sin, those who call themselves gay, and others like them.

"That, my friends, is why the Angels are angry."

While the camera pulled back, and the spotlighted image of McQuarry faded to the winged logo, Derek and Melissa looked at one another uncomfortably.

"This is bad," he said quietly, and pulled out his phone. After dialing Barry, he set it to speakerphone and put it on the table in front of them.

"Thanks for calling back, Derek." Barry sounded troubled, and the echo meant that he was in a hallway.

"We've seen McQuarry's talk. Now what?"

The line was silent for a moment. "'We'? Who's with you?"

"Hi Barry. This is Melissa Fox. We were at my dad's fundraiser when you called. How's Melanie doing?"

"Not good. She's depressed and locked herself in the bathroom the moment we got home. I've been sitting here outside the door ever since, but she doesn't want to talk."

Derek sat forward. "Did she say anything before she locked herself in?"

"Uh huh. About halfway back to the house, she started wailing about what a bad person she's been for ignoring her angels, and how she deserved damnation for it. As soon as I got the door unlocked, she went straight for the sketchpad with all her angel drawings, and took it into the bathroom."

Melissa glanced at Derek, and then turned back towards the phone. "Is there anything you can do?"

"Some drugs would be nice. Antidepressants, sedatives, maybe some pot."

"Scratch the pot," Derek said. "Considering how it affects perception, I'd think that would only make her problem dealing with contexts even worse."

"Good point. So what did you think of McQuarry's sermon?"

"I think he's nuts, but that's not going to stop all the trouble he's likely to cause."

"Why? What do you figure will happen?"

"The easiest way to find out," Melissa said, "is to check the AM radio talk shows. Those guys are usually the first to jump on something like this. Got one handy?"

"Yeah. Hold on." The sound of footsteps soon gave way to a succession of noises and muffled voices as Barry tuned in a talk show. "You're right. Listen to this..."

The muffled voices suddenly got louder and clearer as Barry brought the phone near the speaker.

"—the government is clearly doing the work of the devil."

"Why do you say that, caller?"

"Isn't it obvious? If this Burnout Fever thing is god's way of marking people for damnation, then the Centers for Disease Control is doing the work of the devil.

Why else would they be fighting god's will? I mean—" Barry snapped it off.

"Eek," Melissa said, distaste visible on her face. "I'll bet the people down in Atlanta are bracing for protests at the CDC. Or worse."

Derek turned towards her. "Worse?"

"Yeah. This can turn into a political nightmare, a dispute between people who believe this guy and the public health system, all of it. That includes local doctors struggling to help Burnout patients. My dad's going to want to hear about this."

"Maybe so," Barry said, once again in the hallway, "but I've got something a bit more immediate to deal with. Melanie. Got any ideas?"

"Well," Melissa said, "I think a good place to start would be putting yourself in her situation and seeing what things look like from there. You've got to understand where she is if you ever hope to get her out of there."

Derek looked at her. "You really think so?"

She nodded. "Yeah. She may have lost the ability to easily switch contexts, but from what you've told us, she's definitely involved in the one that McQuarry posits. Go ahead, Barry. Walk us through it."

"Okay." While Barry collected his thoughts, Derek and Melissa listened to the indistinct sound of Melanie talking to herself behind the bathroom door.

"Before all this happened," he said finally, "Melanie reveled in playing around with people's heads. It was a theme that permeated her life. She even did it in her writing, which was why spin-doctors like Julian McKnight sought her out for tricky assignments. Anyway, one of the reasons she liked listening to McQuarry's nonsense was the fact that he used so many metaphors and literary allusions. For her it was like one of those corkscrew roller coasters, except the trip was through her mental landscape, rather than high over some fairground."

Derek stepped into the kitchen and returned with more water.

"Anyway," Barry continued, "she was in the midst of one of those rides when she suddenly froze. And when she started moving a few seconds later, it was like she was a different person. She seemed to be honestly interested in what McQuarry had to say, and stayed with that one perspective on things until he was finished. In a way, it was like she'd been under a spell, one that ended when he finished talking. After that, she returned to dealing with the world around her, but it was as if she was wholly involved with that one vision of reality."

Melissa took a drink. "Okay. Try to describe some of what she's been doing since then, but from her new point of view."

"Well, take the interview she had with McKnight. She'd spent two weeks becoming acquainted with a new way of dealing with the world. Her life was simpler in some ways, because she was no longer bouncing around among a number of different things. Where before, she might be in the midst of half a dozen books and projects, now she stayed with whatever it was until either she was finished or she had to eat or go to sleep or something. She might pick up a different thing to do the next day, but she didn't switch around like she used to. It's a different kind of focus, I guess."

"So after doing this for two weeks, she decides that she's ready to get back on a contract. As long as she had some easily understood goal or plan, she could do whatever she needed to accomplish it, as long as that didn't entail jumping off onto some other goal somewhere along the way. That's where her head was when she walked into McKnight's office. Unfortunately, he hit her with a joke about the job they wanted her for, and she couldn't track it. It didn't mean anything to her, didn't make sense."

Derek nodded. "So she was fine until she was faced with something that she wasn't equipped to deal with."

"Uh huh," Barry said. "Like the storekeeper in 'Pleasantville' when he was faced with something that wasn't in the sitcom world's script. You should have seen what happened when she tried watching that film. To her, it was a horror movie. I think I understand why, now."

Melissa smiled. "Yeah. I suppose she must have felt a bit like Dr. McCoy in the old Star Trek episode, 'Spock's Brain'. Being confronted with that kind of cognitive yoga was for her the same as McCoy being faced with reattaching the Vulcan's brain. Terrifying stuff, if you can see it from the character's point of view."

"Thanks, Melissa. But how does this help me with Melanie?"

"At the very least," she said, "it ought to help you see her situation more clearly. With that, you'll be able to see the kind of solutions that would work for her."

"I suppose." He sounded dubious, but game. "Keep in touch. Bye."

Chapter Ten

Barry sat by the bathroom door, staring at the phone and mulling Melissa's words: 'See it from the character's point of view'.

With a long sigh, he released his grip and watched it tumble across the floor. A sense of unreality danced through his mind, transforming his view down the corridor into a bit of living room in a hallway frame. It seemed oddly appropriate under the circumstances, a real-world metaphor of the effect that Burnout Fever must be having on Melanie's cognitive experience of the

world. It was like she was trapped in a small room at the end of a long hallway, her view of reality limited to what was visible in the larger world on the other end.

He grabbed the phone and stood up. "Mel?"

The bathroom was silent. She had stopped talking to herself, stopped crying. He pressed his ear to the door and listened. Melanie was humming something he couldn't place. In the occasional pause, he could just make out a faint scratching sound.

"Mel," he repeated. "I think McQuarry's wrong about you."

The scratching stopped.

"I think you have been listening to your angel."

"What?" The word was faint, indistinct.

"I know why you've been sketching. Would you unlock the door, please?"

"Tell me first." Her voice was slightly louder, now.

Barry stepped back from the door. "It's a story. The kind McQuarry was talking about. Maybe we can translate it."

She didn't say anything for a time. Then there was the sound of rustling paper, which he took to be Melanie looking back through her earlier sketches. Another silence. Then the latch clicked, the knob turned, and the door wafted open. She stood a bit shakily, clutching the pad to her chest. Barry held out his hand. When she reached out and took it, he gently put his other arm around her and held her close. Then, smiling warmly, he led her down the hall, into the living room, and they sat down together on the couch.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Confused. Depressed."

"Let's take a look at what you've drawn. I think it'll help."

She nodded once and turned back the cover. She ran her fingers over the ornate sketch of an angel, lovingly traced the outline of its feathered wings, and then looked at Barry. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes. Do you remember drawing it? How you felt, or what you were thinking about?"

"They were so perfect. Wilfred always said that."

He put his hand over hers. "You mean McQuarry?"

"Uh huh. He said they were perfect creations of god, and that we started that way, too."

Barry hadn't paid too much attention to what McQuarry had said in all the earlier sermons. Bouncing comments against his words was more of an in-the-moment experience for him, but it seemed that Melanie's subconscious had been listening, and in her current state, she retained those memories far more clearly than he did.

"Started that way?" he asked.

"Sure." She flipped the page. "And we stayed like that for a long time, too." She slowly looked at the pictures on the next few pages, but then stopped at the fourth one, the first angel with expressive eyes, and gingerly touched them with her fingertips.

"What happened here?"

Melanie turned to look at him, and raised her hand, pointing at his eyes. "They saw something."

"Do you know what it was?"

She shook her head.

"Well," he said as he put a finger beside the eyes, "whatever it was, it must have changed them in some way. What I see is the look of someone who's seen something profound, someone who's experienced something uncomfortable that changed her world. Does that help?"

"Well, maybe. Wilfred told us how they felt when we started to ignore them. He said they were very disappointed."

"Not angry?"

She struggled to suppress a smile. "No. They're angels, remember?"

"I guess that makes sense," he said quietly. "What happens next?"

She flipped one page, and then another. The sixth sketch had lost what Barry considered to be a vacuous smile, and instead took on more of a pensive look. "It looks worried," he said.

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Why do you say that?"

"They've..." She winced. "They've been struggling to keep the stories on track despite a lack of cooperation from the people in their care. After a while, that would wear them down."

"Really? Even an angel? I thought they were perfect, created in god's own image."

Melanie looked down at the drawing again. "They were. But..."

"What happens next?"

As she turned over the next two pages, she paused to run her fingers over the angel's increasingly human-looking face, each one looking slightly more disturbed than the last. When she revealed the ninth one, she swallowed hard and sank back into the couch.

Barry leaned over for a closer look. There were tiny details in the wings and robe, imperfections in the fold of cloth and the rows of feather. "It seems to have gotten a lot more realistic here. Is that important?"

"You think this looks more realistic?" she said, a look of confusion crossing her face. "For an angel, wouldn't perfect be more realistic?"

He grinned. "I guess that's a matter of your point of view. To me, imperfections make things look more real."

"But... isn't that just because we live in an imperfect world?"

"Wait a minute." Barry stared blankly at her for a moment, and then took another look at the sketch. "Are you suggesting that this angel's world is no longer perfect?"

"That's what you said. I don't know what it means."

"Well, if I were this angel, I might be concerned that the distinction between my own perfect world and the imperfect one where the people I'm supposed to be coaching live had started to fade. I just can't figure out what that might mean. Let's go to the next sketch."

The next few pages held increasingly distraught winged figures, their robes and wings suffering from the effects of wear and tear. She'd even begun showing a problem with their personal grooming habits.

"Hold on," he said, "what's this?" He lifted the pad for a closer look. "It's her fingers. The way you drew her nails, it looks like she's been chewing on them."

She shrugged, so he flipped to the next page; and the next.

They both sat in silence for a time when he turned to the twelfth sketch. This one introduced an entirely new aspect, the presence of a background. Where before she'd hinted at clouds with curving contours and subtle shading, now the angel was standing on some sort of surface. It was flat and featureless, with infinite distance suggested by long straight lines converging in the distance.

"What happened to the clouds?"

"They blew away." Her voice was flat.

Barry looked at her. "Blew away. Do the clouds mean something? If they were blown away, was something about the angel's world lost? It seems like a pretty drastic change. Do the clouds mean something to you?"

"They felt like cotton. Comfortable. Like the angel was wrapped in them, protecting it."

"Interesting. Protecting it from what?"

She closed her eyes and lowered her head. A few seconds later, she blinked a few times, leaned forward, and put both hands on the page, flanking the angel. "From seeing something, I think. But that doesn't make any sense. Why would God want to hide things from his angels?"

"How do you know they were hiding something from the angel? Maybe they were hiding something about the angels from you."

"From me?"

"Well, yeah. You're the one drawing these pictures."

She shrugged. "But what?"

"I don't know. They're your pictures. You're the one telling the story. Let's find out. Turn the page."

She tentatively fingered the corner of the paper, and then tossed it back to reveal the next sketch. Instead of a featureless plain, the angel on this page stood in front of a distant range of hills. The one after that showed some unidentifiable objects in the middle distance, and the following one had some kind of wall behind the angel. Each time, the figure looked more worn, less well fed, and dirtier than the one before. When they reached the sketch he'd seen earlier — the one with the straggly bushes and walkway in front of the building behind the winged figure — he pressed his fingers against the page.

"This one has something else new," he said, a bit nervously. "There's a reflection of someone in the window."

Melanie bit her lip. "I know."

“Do you know who it is?”

She shook her head.

There was one more sketch, the one she'd done while hiding in the bathroom. Barry slowly turned the page, and then sat back and stared. For some reason, she'd drawn the angel as if it was out of focus, with shading where, in earlier pages, she'd laboriously drawn the details of damage to robe, wings, face and hands. And yet, at the same time, she had carefully sketched the details of the reflection in the distant window. If it had been a photograph, the focus would have been on that reflection, with a narrow depth of field to render the foreground figure as if it was diffused at the edges.

He picked up the pad to get a closer look at the image in the window, then lowered it and looked in puzzlement at Melanie. The reflected scene, if he understood it, was of someone at a table in a dim coffeehouse. And from the cut of the hair and clothes, it seemed to be someone out of the 1950s, a glimpse of a young man from the Beat Generation.

Chapter Eleven

If Derek and Melissa hardly said a word to one another on the drive back to the 10K run, it wasn't for lack of anything to say. After hearing the radio talk show rant that Barry had found in Seattle, they were curious to learn how McQuarry's pronouncement was playing out locally, so Derek tuned one in, and they rode on, speechless.

For some reason, the obscure preacher from Shasta Lake had ignited a wildfire of reaction. His assertion that Burnout Fever was a sign of divine will had split public sentiment into two camps, driving together coalitions of people who ordinarily wouldn't even speak with one another. McQuarry certainly wasn't the first preacher to claim either divine inspiration or knowledge of divine will, but those who had predicted Armageddon before him didn't have such an insidious disease to associate it with. As one caller suggested, the ongoing war on terrorism and rumors of reprisals provided a convincing backdrop to the claim, and gave it substance even if none was deserved. Unfortunately, such thoughtful analysis was in the minority, even if it did give the radio host someone to actually hold a conversation with.

Shortly before they reached the 10K site, however, the talk show was interrupted by a news report, an account of a traffic incident involving three of the runners.

“This is Amy Gratham of DC First News, reporting from the site of today's DuraBar 10K fundraising run for the Northern Virginia Neurological Institute. A few minutes ago, as a result of a deadly incident along the course, the organizers suspended the event and asked all of the participants to return to the starting area. Despite signs and barricades, the driver of a green SUV did not stop on the cross street to wait for the runners to pass. After pushing past the barrels, the vehicle ran into a knot of runners, killing one and injuring two, before being stopped. The two injured runners have been transported to the hospital for treatment.”

Derek glanced at Melissa as he pulled into the event parking area. “Sounds like Burnout Fever.”

“If it was,” she said, craning to locate her father, “this could get ugly.”

After he found a parking spot, they set out across the field to where Congressman Fox stood. He was arguing with someone when they approached, so they stopped just within earshot and waited.

“Yes,” he said to the young man brandishing an energy bar, “I know that there have been protests against PanAgra, but if you'll just read the label, you'll see that there are no GMOs in these bars.”

“Sure, if they're actually telling the truth. But we don't have any reason to believe them.

They've got a terrible track record, and every reason to lie."

Fox paused to take a breath, and noticed that Derek and Melissa were nearby. "Wait a minute," he said, motioning the two to join them, "I think we can get another opinion on this."

The young man turned around, but shook his head darkly at the sight of Derek. "Come on, Congressman Fox, I hardly think that a political activist can have anything useful to say about a public health issue like GMOs."

Derek chuckled. "It's good to see you, too, Malcolm. Look, we just got back. What's going on?"

"Who's this?" Melissa asked.

"Oh, sorry," Derek said. "Melissa Fox, this is Malcolm Jeffries, one of the bright lights in the local agitator community."

Jeffries glanced at Melissa and then at her father before speaking. "What's your angle, Derek? Infiltrating the enemy's camp?"

Boa waved him off, and turned to Fox. "If you two are arguing about whether there are GMOs in the DuraBars, you might want to put that on hold for a bit. There's something a bit more important going on."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Some jerk preacher on the Internet started a flap this morning about Burnout Fever being god's way of saying you're damned. There's already a radio debate going on around the country over it."

Jeffries shrugged. "Yeah? So what?"

"Daddy," Melissa said suddenly, "do they know why that driver blew through the barricades?"

"Not really, cupcake. According to the EMTs, she was on her cell phone, and just forgot she was even driving."

Melissa nodded, and looked solemnly at Jeffries. "That's what. If religious extremists get the idea that the driver killed a runner due to being marked for damnation with Burnout Fever, then some of them are going to claim it was all god's will. This traffic incident could explode into a religious war."

"So what?" he repeated. "Why should I care? What's that got to do with whether there are GMOs in the chocolate?"

"Oh," she smiled. "I forgot to mention something. It seems that damning the Burnout cases is a prelude to the Rapture. Well, at least that's the way this McQuarry guy tells it. If you want something to protest, I suggest you go after the folks beating down the doors of the CDC right about now. From what I hear on the radio, they've decided that the government is in league with the devil for trying to find a cure. GMOs are small potatoes in comparison."

Fox winced. "Look, both of you, arguing over a medical diagnosis that hasn't even been made yet isn't going to get us anywhere right now. What I suggest is that we deal with the situation we're faced with at the moment."

"Very pragmatic," Derek said, amused.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Only that you ought to have a word with Amy Gratham. She's been reporting on the accident for her talk show station, and the on-air discussion has already gotten out of hand. Calm assurances from you that everything is under control can do a lot to dampen the temper of their listeners."

"Look," Jeffries said in annoyance, "I really don't care about all this religious nonsense. I came here to tell people about the danger in the DuraBars. I'll leave you three to work this out among yourselves."

"Okay," Derek said, turning back to Congressman Fox, "so now what?"

"I go see that reporter. Where is she now?"

"Probably still at the accident site," Melissa said. "That's where all the action is, I guess."

Fox took a few steps, then stopped and turned back. "Oh, yeah. I almost forgot. Do you two have any plans for dinner tonight?"

"Nothing special, daddy. Why?"

"A committee I'm on has been discussing procedural rules for lobby groups, and I'd like to get your opinions. After all, you've been looking into the same sort of thing, just from a different direction."

"Sure."

"Fine with me," Derek said.
"Great. See you both about seven."

* * *

"It's a good thing we don't have a full moon tonight," Melissa said when her father opened the door.

"Oh?"

She nodded, and walked in. "Yeah. Considering all the crazy stuff that's been going on today, I can just imagine how much worse it would be with the loonies out howling at the moon as well."

"I haven't checked the news since I got home," Fox said while hanging their coats in the closet. "What's happening?"

Derek looked around at the sparse décor. In stark contrast to Melissa's informal clutter of functional tech, her father's house looked like a cross between Art Deco and PostModern retro. "I'm impressed," he said. "You two balance one another's tastes out pretty nicely. Is this your style, or did you have someone decorate for you?"

"Both, really. Melissa's mother was a buyer for a corporate design firm. This was her last project before she died."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize that—"

"Don't worry, Derek," Melissa said. "We don't mind talking about her."

Fox led them into the formal dining room, where he'd laid out a buffet style feast of fruit, salad, cheeses, cold cuts and a variety of drinks. "Make yourselves comfortable. I wanted to have some time to talk tonight, so I gave the chef the night off."

Melissa chuckled as she took a seat. "Don't listen to him, Derek. He's the chef. At least this way he won't be making trips to the kitchen all night."

"So," Fox said when they were all settled, "you were saying? What's been going on?"

"I suppose we should start with my buddy Malcolm," Derek said while serving himself some melon balls. "He apparently called some of his friends, and they staged a spontaneous protest against PanAgra's use of GMOs outside the Neurological Institute's administration building. They even got some press coverage out of it."

"I wish Congress could act that quickly," Fox replied. "What kind of an organization does he have, anyway?"

"None, really," Melissa said. "It's more like an intelligent slime mold."

Derek laughed. "Don't let him hear you say that. He'd take it as an insult."

"It's a compliment, really," she said as she built a salad. "You can split his kind of organization up and sprinkle them around the country, and it would re-form itself like a slime mold to respond to whatever challenge came up."

Fox tapped his fork in thought briefly. "It sounds like they've taken the Hollywood model and flattened it out."

"The what?" Derek said.

"The Hollywood model. Studios used to turn movies out like a factory, but then the industry learned from independents and discovered that it was more efficient to create a production company at need, from a pool of talent: directors, camera people, sound and lighting specialists, even actors."

"Sure, daddy," Melissa said, "but those organizations get dissolved when the film is finished. Groups like the one we're talking about have more continuity. Malcolm's slime mold has a memory. It learns from its mistakes, and can pass that knowledge around indiscriminately. It's like if the lighting guys in the movie company could suddenly take over from the set decorators. People play whatever role is needed at the moment."

"I don't understand," Fox said after a sip of juice. "How do they know how the job is done?"

"You could call them prototypes, I suppose," Derek suggested. "Imagine there was a library of roles that you could play, and each one came with a brief manual. When people come together to respond to a challenge, they take stock of their local talent pool and divvy up the roles. Most people end up doing what they're good at, what they already know how to do. But if there are some uncast roles in their play, as it were, some of the spare players simply grab the prototype, read the manual, and dive into the part."

"That reminds me," Melissa said. "That screwball preacher from California set off quite a mess with his sermon this morning."

"Yeah," Fox said. "You mentioned something about that this afternoon. Who is he, anyway?"

"His name is McQuarry," Derek said as he reached for some salad. "The guy does a webcast every Sunday morning. Until now, his sermons have been pretty innocuous. His theology is pretty much focused on angels and how they guide and protect us."

Melissa picked up the train of thought. "We took a look at today's sermon after Derek got a call from a friend of his in Seattle. The guy's totally lost it, gone off the deep end."

Derek nodded. "Yeah. Barry had told me that McQuarry liked literary references, and had started bringing props on the set as well, things like a dummy movie script. Well, this morning he set off a small religious war. He's claiming that Burnout Fever is god's way of saying 'have a nice time in hell'. Worse, he says that's just the opening act of the Rapture."

"And?" Fox prompted.

"Daddy, do you remember my first science fair project, the one with the supersaturated solution? Well, it's like he dropped his sermon into something like that. The story was picked up almost immediately by the news services, only they cast it for humor. When that got sent around the world in emails, phone calls and chat rooms, it set off a chain reaction of responses. Radio talk shows picked it up pretty fast, too."

Derek wagged his pickle like it was a baton. "For some reason, the idea started to gather momentum. People began choosing sides. The rhetoric went ballistic. A few hours ago, from what we saw on cable news before we came over, the debate mutated into a struggle between secular and religious factions of all kinds. There were confrontations in Boston and Chicago between the Catholic archdiocese and the city government over the use of tax money to support research into Burnout Fever. So far, it hasn't turned violent, but there's a good chance that it might."

Dinner turned quiet after that. One or another of them attempted to change the subject, to start a discussion of something else, but nobody had much interest. Instead, they finished eating in intermittent silence. After he cleared the table and brought out some cake and coffee, Congressman Fox picked up a knife and just sat there, staring at it.

"You okay, daddy?" Melissa said finally.

Fox nodded. "Yeah. I'm just wondering what will happen on the hill tomorrow morning."

"Why's that?"

He looked at her. "We're discussing the CDC's finances. They've requested additional funding for the distributed research effort they started on Burnout Fever. It could get pretty nasty in that committee meeting."

Chapter Twelve

"Good morning, Arthur. How was your weekend?"

Surprised by the familiar voice behind him, Congressman Fox broke his stride and stepped towards the side of the busy hallway in the Rayburn House Office Building. "Lilly," he said happily. "I didn't hear you sneaking up on me. How are you?"

Fox had known Congresswoman Lillian Haekson since before she'd been elected to office by the voters of eastern Washington, and was amused to find himself on the finance subcommittee she chaired. They had first met on a ski trip in the Rockies while Arthur was courting his late wife, and had, at the time, been tempted to suggest a threesome. He was still attracted by her pixyish good looks, of course, but life had made them more suited to a professional rather than a personal relationship. Still, her presence in the House gave him a solid feeling of rightness, of being where he was supposed to be on the path God had chosen for him.

"I heard what happened at your fundraiser," she said quietly. "Too bad about that runner who was killed."

He nodded. "Well, at least the other two are doing okay. I'm glad we had an EMT crew on standby. If it had taken much longer to get them to the hospital, there might have been only one survivor."

"Do they know why the driver ran the barricades?"

"Burnout Fever, from what I heard."

Haekson glanced around at the crowd. "It's getting pretty serious, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Fredrik spent the weekend back in Providence with his brother. I think he's worried that he might be at higher risk of Burnout because they're twins."

She sighed. "Has anyone in your family got this thing yet?"

"Not so far." He checked his watch. "I think we'd better get going. We only have the room for an hour, and there's a lot of ground to cover."

When Fox and Haekson entered the hearing room, they found the other three committee members already there, their two visitors from the Centers for Disease Control getting settled at the witness table, and a small crowd of spectators chatting among themselves in the back.

"Morning, Fredrik," Fox said to Congressman Malden as he took the seat beside him. "How's your brother?"

"About the same. His paintings have gotten a lot better since he got Burnout Fever, though."

"Oh?"

"It's not surprising, really. My sister-in-law said he was working on one when it hit. That's all he's interested in doing any more. All the practice must help, I suppose."

Haekson took the center chair, on the other side of Malden. "What's he painting these days?"

He turned towards her. "I wish I knew, Lillian. It's like he sees someone that we don't. He's done a number of pictures of this one person. There's nothing special, nothing really interesting about the guy, except that he's Asian."

"Can you tell anything about the location or the time period?" Fox asked.

Malden thought for a moment. "It's rural, and the terrain reminds me of pictures I've seen of Cambodia. But it can't be contemporary, or at least if it is there isn't any sign of technology."

Donald Cook, the Nevada Republican sitting beyond Haekson, cleared his throat. "Could we get this meeting started, please?"

Fox watched as she sat a bit straighter in her chair. For as long as he had known her, Lilly had the knack of appearing to be more than one person. When she dug in to accomplish something, be it skiing or managing a chaotic crowd, she took on a kind of persona, acted as if she were playing the part of an expert in performing the task. On the slopes, for example, she changed from being an academic on a well-deserved break, to a supremely confident master of the downhill arts. That she could do this even before gaining the experience required to actually pull it off didn't really matter, because by acting the part, those around her believed in her abilities, and that, in turn, increased both her confidence and her competence. Of course, being a quick study didn't hurt, but this bit of stagecraft camouflaged the time it took her to catch on to the tricks and techniques of whatever challenge she'd accepted.

Now playing the part of an expert parliamentarian, she brought the small room to order and laid out the ground rules for the meeting. After introducing the members of the subcommittee, she identified their two guests from the CDC, and asked them to give a capsule summary of their areas of expertise for the discussion. Once researcher Dr. Elena Morales and finance and logistics analyst Harvey Wood had finished their remarks, she turned the floor over to Fox.

"Dr. Morales," he said, "we've been hearing a lot of things about Burnout Fever from the press lately, but most of it is hype. Could you please tell us how the research effort started, and what has been learned so far?"

"Certainly, Congressman. We've only been working on this problem for about six weeks now, and it hasn't been easy. We believe that the first cases were reported during the summer, but we can't be certain yet, because it is not a recognized disease. Because the symptoms appeared to be like ordinary job burnout, those physicians whose patients presented with it most likely recommended time away from the stressor, and may not have done any follow-up. It was only after many of those patients began returning to their jobs that the seriousness of the situation became evident."

"And why was that?" Fox said.

"We may not know the cause of it yet, but the effects are clear. People suffering from Burnout Fever do not recover from it, as they would be expected to if it were simple overwork. As a result, they continue to operate with reduced cognitive function. Due to the highly technical nature of the jobs in a great many sectors of the economy, employees with reduced cognitive function are no longer able to perform the tasks they had been doing prior to presenting with Burnout Fever."

Fox glanced at Malden. "Some of us on this panel have seen it firsthand. Do you know why it happens?"

“Unfortunately, no. In order to isolate the process and the triggers, we first have to collect a body of evidence, so that we can have enough cases over which to conduct comparisons. That was the first stage of our effort. With the scant resources available to handle the problem, we began by contacting medical facilities, but because there was no reason for primary care physicians to have reported these cases, not much was accomplished in this way.”

“Where did you go from there? If physicians aren’t reporting cases of Burnout Fever, can’t you issue a directive requesting them to?”

Dr. Morales looked at the other members of the subcommittee. “We have, but there are other issues clouding the situation. Because the distinction between simple overwork and Burnout Fever is only known in retrospect, at least for now, we don’t learn about new cases immediately. Then, unless the patient or a family member reports back to the physician after the prescribed period of rest, the physician has no way to know whether the patient has recovered. And some of the people who get this disease, or those around them, disguise the problem if they can, in order to avoid losing their jobs or being put on reduced-pay status.”

“Has this stopped your effort?”

“No, Congressman Fox. Fortunately, we have a network of associates around the country who have been willing to help. Some of the people we have worked with on other problems have responded to our request for assistance by starting regional support teams. By and large, these people are doing this on their own time, but for the distributed effort to be useful, for it to be an effective addition to the work we are doing in Atlanta, some of the institutions at which they work will require some small amount of funding. The more members of this distributed effort that there are, the more funding it will require.”

“Congressman Fox,” Haekson said, “since you seem to be straying into questions of funding, I’d like to let the other members of our subcommittee have some time as well.”

Donald Cook raised a finger.

“The gentleman from Nevada has the floor.”

Congressman Cook templed his fingers. “You mentioned the effects on employers, Dr. Morales. My administrative assistant has what appears to be Burnout Fever. When she returned to work, and I realized that she wouldn’t be able to handle the tasks she’d been doing before, rather than letting her go, I spent some time with her to find out how she could help out. Do you have any information about how this is affecting the workforce in general?”

Harvey Wood raised a finger. “I’ll take this one. As it turned out, our best source for that kind of insight was the network of support teams. Since they were closer to the patients, it made sense to have them interview those in their area, as well as any family, friends and employers that were willing to cooperate. Using a model started by the team at the University of Washington, they did field interviews, and then passed transcripts back to the CDC for analysis.”

“I know how tight their budgets are,” Haekson said. “Were they among the groups that you need funding for?”

“Actually, no. One of the freelancers that the leader of that group, a grad student named Leslie Omak, enlisted managed to convince some of the businesses in the Puget Sound region to donate funds. From what I hear, it worked out pretty well. The team has dubbed the tactic the Lieber Method, after the freelancer who made it happen in Seattle.”

Cook smiled. “Do you know how he convinced them? What argument he used?”

“Mel Brooks once said that it all came down to fear. In this case, however, it was more a matter of greed. Lieber is a negotiator by trade, and he showed them how an increasing number of cases would affect their workforce over time: staffing problems, outsourcing to compensate for resources lost to Burnout Fever, falling production efficiency, loss of revenue, the whole nine yards. He then offered a solution: help pay the costs of doing something about it. It’s kind of a user-fee solution to a broad-based problem, but since some businesses have more at risk than others, it seems to work.”

Samuel Langner, the congressman from Iowa, spoke next. “In that case, what do you need the funding for?”

“As I said, some businesses have more at risk than others. What that means is that some regions have enough of these donor businesses to support the local effort, while others do not. Those are the teams we need additional funding for. The breakdown is in the paper that we submitted.”

“Getting back to the problem itself,” Haekson said, “there are dozens of alleged cures and treatments out there already, even though you tell us you don’t even know what causes Burnout

Fever. Has the CDC considered issuing any instructions to the public regarding what to watch out for, or how to treat the symptoms?"

There was a sudden rustling from the spectator seats, and then someone called out, "What a crock! There's no cure for damnation!"

A stern look came over Haekson's face as she quickly scanned the audience, looking for a guilty posture or a defiant leer. "When we began this meeting," she said in measured cadence, "I laid out the ground rules. Spectators are here to observe. Whoever it was that made that comment, I'm giving you a choice. You can either walk out of here alone, or I'll have security remove all of you."

Nothing happened for a moment, and then a well-dressed man in the back row stood up. "May I have one question answered before I leave?"

Pleased at the civil turn of events, Haekson nodded. "I'll grant you that, Mr...?"

"Szendal. Viktor Szendal. Thank you." He waited for the room to quiet before continuing. "A respected religious leader from California has said that this Burnout Fever is God's work. By implication, then, anyone seeking to cure it is in league with the devil."

A few other voices in the small crowd said, "Amen."

Haekson slapped the table with her palm. "The rest of you were not given permission to speak."

The man smiled at his supporters. "By that logic," he said slowly, "funding this project is a violation of the constitutional separation of church and state."

"You said you had a question, Mr. Szendal?"

"Yes. Are you prepared to have every corporation involved in supporting this so-called research shut down by lawsuits, protests and boycotts?"

Haekson breathed heavily for a moment, visibly measuring her reaction. Then she raised her hand a few inches to make a point, and froze.

"I thought so," he said a few seconds later. "You can't answer that, can you? Well, I guess I have my answer then."

She looked down at her hand, and watched it as she put it back on the table.

While Szendal was making his way to the door, Fox leaned close. "Lilly?" he said quietly. "Are you all right?"

Dr. Morales stood up. "Someone call a doctor."

Chapter Thirteen

Dr. Morales looked up from her book when Arthur Fox entered Lilly Haekson's hospital room. "Good morning, Congressman Fox."

"Arthur will be fine." He smiled, nodding towards the empty bed. "Where's Lilly?"

She looked at her watch. It was nearly eleven. "They ought to be finished with her test by now."

"Test?"

"Yes. I asked to have a functional MRI scan performed for the CDC before she was released this morning. If it really was Burnout Fever, we can get some invaluable information by checking her brain function from time to time. This would be the first case in which we'll have the opportunity to monitor the patient from onset. I've arranged to stay in town for a while to keep an eye on things, and to help your subcommittee in any way I can."

"And Mr. Wood?"

"Harvey flew back to Atlanta after yesterday's hearing. He said there were some preparations he wanted to make to handle what he suspects would be a high-profile press inquiry about her condition."

When Fox realized that she hadn't changed her clothes since the meeting, he said, "Have you been here all night?"

She nodded. "Well, after you left last night, I'd planned to find a hotel, but I just couldn't tear

myself away from the situation. It's the field worker in me, I guess."

"Hi, Arthur," Lilly said as a hospital orderly wheeled her through the door. "They said I could leave now. You know, I never appreciated how much structure there was in hospital procedure."

He frowned. "Structure?"

"Sure," she said as she got out of the chair and the orderly turned to leave. "You know how much I enjoy parliamentary procedure. Well, they have a different set of rules here, but the idea is still the same."

Fox thought for a moment. "Listen, Lilly. I have a big house and could stand some company. Would you mind using the guestroom while you recover?"

She shrugged. "Recover from what? I feel fine!"

"I spoke with your doctor while you were upstairs," Morales said. "We agreed that the best thing you can do is to take some time off and spend it with friends and family. If you really do have Burnout Fever, it would be best if you were with people who knew you very well, so that any changes can be reported immediately."

"Well," she said reluctantly, "I suppose that would be all right. I'll need to pack some clothes, of course."

"Not a problem," Fox said, "we can swing past your place first." He turned towards Morales. "Come to think about it, there's enough room in my house for you, too. If you're serious about wanting to monitor Lilly's progress, you're welcome to join us."

She looked down briefly. "I wouldn't want to impose, Congressma—"

"Arthur," he corrected her.

Morales laughed. "Okay, I surrender. But I insist on cooking for my keep."

"Great," he said happily.

A few minutes later, one of the floor nurses came in to give Fox an aftercare briefing. When they were done, she took Dr. Morales aside and they spoke quietly for several minutes. The transport orderly arrived just as the floor nurse was saying goodbye. Eager to leave, Lilly hopped in the wheelchair, and they headed for the lobby.

In the glare of the early winter light beyond the automatic airlock doors, Fox spotted a woman holding a microphone and talking with a cameraman. He turned to Morales. "That reporter out there is Amy Gratham. Let me do the talking."

As the outer doors slid aside, Gratham stepped closer, her associate following the action with his lens. "Congresswoman Haekson," she said quickly, "we've had a report that you were stricken with Burnout Fever during a meeting yesterday. Is that true?"

Fox stepped between the microphone and the wheelchair. "Hello, Ms. Gratham," he said amiably."

"Congressman Fox," she said, quickly changing gears. "You were in the meeting at the time. Do you have anything to say?"

"Only what the CDC told us. You can only tell whether it's really Burnout Fever after a few weeks rest. Congresswoman Haekson has been very busy in the past few weeks, and she could simply be suffering from a common case of overwork. So if you don't mind, we'd like to get her home so she can follow the advice she was given by her doctor and get some rest."

Before Gratham had a chance to respond, a man in a dark wool suit pushed past Dr. Morales and stood over Haekson's wheelchair, looking haughtily down at her. When the transport orderly attempted to pull the wheelchair out into the open, he grabbed the armrest.

Fox recognized him. "Just what is this all about, Szendal? First you disrupt a hearing, and now you're stalking a member of Congress."

He sneered in dismissal. "I'm not stalking her, if you really want to know. It's my right as a citizen to know whether the people elected to represent the people are in any condition to remain in office!"

"Oh? So now it's a crime for someone to take ill?"

Gratham motioned her cameraman to keep rolling.

"I told you all," Szendal said in a low voice, "that seeking a cure for Burnout Fever was against God's will." He looked at Morales. "You and the rest of the CDC are in league with the devil!"

She shook her head. "You're crazy."

He glared at her. "I don't think you're in any position to make a charge like that, Dr. Morales."

"And I suppose you have some way to back up that accusation?"

"Look," Fox said, pushing between them, "if you have a problem with what the CDC is doing, then file a complaint. Making personal attacks on members of Congress or employees of the CDC is not going to get you what you want." He pointed at the camera. "Especially when you do it on TV. There are better ways to get your point across."

"So there are," he said, turning to leave, "so there are."

While Gratham attempted to explain the incident to her viewers, Fox turned to Haekson. "Are you all right?"

She laughed. "Of course, Arthur. Have you ever considered taking on a chairmanship?"

He looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"You defused that crisis quite well, I thought. Running a committee isn't much different, really. All you have to do is keep everyone in line. The rules take care of everything else."

He nodded weakly. "If you say so, Lilly. Listen, I'll get the car and be right back to pick you up." Then to Dr. Morales, "I'll drop you by your rental, and you can follow us."

During the drive home, Fox turned on the radio and found that Gratham had expanded their brief encounter at the hospital into the opening salvo of a rundown on recent events. Apparently, both the TV channel and the radio station owned by her employers were using the same source material, but she'd had to edit in some narration for the radio audience.

"This reporter has learned that Viktor Szendal is the DC area leader of a religious action group that has sprung up almost overnight. They use McQuarry's pronouncements about the Rapture as a jumping-off point, but go much farther than he had. Using the preacher's assertion that those with Burnout Fever have been marked for damnation, they have begun a global effort to identify prominent people who, for one reason or another, have not been in the public eye. They then accuse these people of having succumbed to what they have begun calling 'Damnation Fever,' and challenge them to come forward and prove them wrong."

"Their targets come from not only governments around the world, but from business and the entertainment industry as well. The result of all their activity has been a flurry of sudden appearances by public and not-so-public figures, as well as a flurry of press releases attempting to deflect the accusations. But because the group doesn't appear to have any central authority, it is, at least so far, impossible for any governmental agency to rein them in."

"This is Amy Gratham, reporting for DC First News."

The phone was ringing when Fox opened the front door, so he answered it while Dr. Morales helped Haekson with her coat. It was Melissa.

"Hi daddy. What's going on with Aunt Lilly? I just heard on the radio that—"

"She's all right, and she's with me, cupcake. Why don't you come join us for dinner? Elena Morales from the CDC is staying to help with Lilly, and she's volunteered for kitchen duty."

"Sure. Mind if Derek joins us?"

Fox looked at Haekson. "Actually, I'd prefer it. There's some stuff going on that I'd like to talk with both of you about."

Chapter Fourteen

"So tell me about your Aunt Lilly," Derek said as he watched the first snowfall of the season glistening in the cones of passing headlamps.

Melissa laughed while they waited for the traffic light. "She's not my aunt, really. My folks have known her since they were dating. To hear my dad tell it, you'd think the ski trip they met at was something out of one of those screwball movies from the forties, a real comedy of errors."

"Why, what happened?"

"It started with some kind of mix-up in the reservations." The light changed, and she slowly

accelerated. "Guests were supposed to be given some pointers about the slopes by one of the resident experts before setting out for an afternoon of cross-country skiing. For some reason, though, that particular group didn't include a guide. But since my Aunt Lilly seemed to know her way around so well, the others in the group just assumed that she was their expert."

"And she played along?"

"That's the story. Of course my mom always insisted that she could tell there was something wrong, that she knew Lilly was faking, but kept quiet about it just to see what would happen."

Derek grinned. "Then it's your mother that you really take after. And here I thought that being a troublemaker wasn't inherited."

"It's not," she retorted. "I just had an excellent role model, that's all."

"Which one? Your mother, or your Aunt Lilly?"

"All three of them, I think."

Having found a parking space, Melissa grabbed a small box from the back seat, and they walked the few blocks to her father's townhouse. By the time they reached the door, the snow had stopped, leaving a light dusting on the ground, and scattered remnants of the flurry swirling around in random gusts of wind.

"Welcome back, Derek," Fox said when he opened the door. "Maybe tonight we can actually have the discussion I wanted to start last time you visited."

While Fox collected coats, Dr. Morales stepped over. "Coffee, tea, hot chocolate?"

"Hot chocolate," Melissa said, walking towards their guest. "You must be the researcher from the CDC."

She nodded. "That's right. My name is Elena Morales. Your father has been telling me stories about you."

Melissa glanced at him. "Not that one, daddy?"

He looked offended. "Of course not, cupcake."

Derek extended a hand towards Dr. Morales. "Derek Boa. Welcome to DC. Oh, and coffee for me, thanks."

Haekson, who had quietly joined the small group, stood solemnly, her arms crossed and a stern expression on her face. "Don't I get a kiss?"

"Aunt Lilly!" Melissa went over and gave her a long hug, whispering something in her ear while taking furtive glances back at her father.

"Hey, you two," Fox said, "stop conspiring!"

Dinner was a breezy two hours of good food and friendly chatter. Dr. Morales — she insisted that everyone call her Elena — made everything but the dessert, and got raves all around for the Churrasco. There might even have been some Brazilian barbecue sauce left over, had it not been for the existence of several fresh rolls, which ended up being dragged through the sauce like it was dip. Their discussion turned serious once the table had been cleared for dessert, and they took some time to relax before Fox revealed the secret he'd alluded to several times during dinner.

Melissa was the first to break the ice. "Aunt Lilly," she said during a lull in the conversation. "You've been awfully formal all evening. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I'm fine dear. It's just that Arthur keeps such an orderly house, that's all. I'm just reflecting the mood of the décor."

Melissa sat back and glanced at the art deco doorway trim, a touch her mother had copied from the Empire State Building. They certainly suggested the kind of formality you'd expect at a 1920's-era supper club, but that was why her mother had balanced them with vintage animation cells from scandalous cartoons of the time. "The mood? But you always used to kid him about it, told him to loosen up."

While Haekson searched for a reply, Fox put his hand over his daughter's and whispered, "She was chairing a meeting, remember?"

Melissa nodded and turned back towards her aunt. "It's not important."

Morales cleared her throat. "I've been meaning to ask you, Melissa. What's in the box you brought in?"

"Box?" she said, momentarily caught between contexts. "Oh, right. I got hardcopy of the latest additions to my collection. I sell, um, subversive greeting cards on the web."

"Don't let her kid you, Elena," Derek said wryly, "she's serious about these."

"Arthur told me you were an artist on our way here." She gestured at the framed animation cells on the wall. "Was that something you got from your mother?"

"In a way, I suppose. She collected, I draw."

"May I see them?"

Melissa shrugged. "Sure." She brought the box back from the living room, placed it on a corner of the table, and then rejoined Derek. Morales quietly read through several cards, pausing each time to either grin or grimace. But then she stopped. One of them must have had a special impact on her, because she studied it for quite some time before lowering it.

"I don't know about this one," she said uneasily.

Melissa reached towards her. "Which one? Why?"

Morales turned the card around. On the front was a caricature of Rev. McQuarry in a window, holding up a box of dish soap. The caption read, "...and if you order before the Rapture, we'll send you a free set of steak knives." Inside there was another drawing of McQuarry, only this time the preacher was holding up a fork with what looked like a slab of raw flesh. "There'll be plenty to eat afterwards, but no one to say grace to".

"The thing is," Derek said, "she knows her market. There are a lot of people out there that think this whole affair is nothing more than a really well publicized case of mass hysteria. Melissa's dark humor helps them to deflate it."

"Maybe so," Morales said doubtfully, "but what about the people who believe in the Rapture, even though they don't think it's upon us? Suggestions of cannibalism are pretty inflammatory."

Haekson glanced back and forth between them.

"But that's just the point," Melissa said, replacing the card in her box. "By distorting the implications into grotesque fantasies, I'm helping to put McQuarry's pronouncements into perspective."

"Perhaps," Fox said, "but what can you do to deflate the very real threats of public interrogations that are being carried out by people like that madman who disrupted our meeting?" His voice grew strident. "Accusing people of being damned, and then challenging them to disprove the accusation, is right out of Torquemada's play book."

Haekson, who had been watching the exchange with a growing sense of unease, began to hyperventilate, and pounded her fist on the table. "Stop! You're out of order! I'll not have that kind of disruption in my meeting room."

Morales raised her palms. "I think we'd better back off."

Fox comforted Haekson. "It's been a long day, and you could probably do with some rest. Come on upstairs and I'll show you your room."

Melissa watched in silence as her father helped his old friend up the stairs, and then looked back at Derek. "Barry was right. She's stuck in her parliamentarian persona, just like Melanie fixated on McQuarry's angels."

"I'd seen some reports about that effect," Morales said.

Derek nodded. "A buddy of mine from Seattle has been dealing with it for over a month now. His wife was watching McQuarry's webcast when she got Burnout Fever. Ever since then, it's like she was hypnotized or something. According to Barry, she's been sketching nothing but angels."

"Yeah," Melissa agreed. "You and my dad were both at the meeting when Aunt Lilly took sick. It looks like she thinks she's still playing the part of master parliamentarian. Barry told us that when Melanie encounters an unexpected context switch, she freaks."

"Barry?" Morales did a mild double take. "That wouldn't happen to be Barry Lieber, would it?"

Derek grinned. "Sure is. Do you know him?"

She smiled. "I've read his reports. Mr. Lieber has been extremely helpful to the effort. In fact, he even managed to get some businesses to foot the bill for the team at UW."

Fox started down the stairs. "Have I missed anything important?"

"Just connecting the dots. It seems the Lieber Method I told you about was developed by a friend of Derek's. Which just goes to show you how small the human network really is."

"The what?"

"Network. But I won't say another word until you reveal that surprise dessert you keep hinting about."

Fox tried to hide his pained expression as he left to get dessert. A short time later, he returned with a platter piled with a mountain of cupcakes.

Melissa turned red and hid her face.

Derek chortled. "I gather this is some sort of family joke?"

She sighed and reluctantly faced the table. "This has been going on since my fifth birthday, believe it or not."

Morales examined the platter for a moment. "What has?"

"I'm waiting," Derek added.

While her father stood over the platter stifling a laugh, Melissa took one of the small pastries off the top of the pile and stared at it. "For my fifth birthday, mom made me a cake with five candles. I guess I was into sharing that year, because I insisted on having it cut into five pieces, one with each candle, before I'd blow them out. Now dad, of course, couldn't leave it at that. In order to for me to get my wish, he said I had to blow them all out with one breath, and then he scattered the pieces around the table. So there I was, sitting in the middle of the table, surrounded by birthday cake, with my father egging me on, daring me to blow them all out. I took a big breath, and spun around so I could get them all, but my foot was out too far, and I ended up covering everyone with cake. It was hilarious."

"And, uh," Derek hazarded, "I suppose that's where you got the nickname?"

"Yeah. So here's my question, dad: Why today? It's not my birthday, after all."

"No," he said, "but it was your mother's."

She sniffed and took a bite. "Happy birthday, mom, wherever you are."

Derek broke off a chunk of his and tossed it in his mouth. "And that brings us back around to McQuarry's angels. Do you suppose your mom's one of them now?"

"It's a nice thought," she said, "but I doubt she'd be happy there. Have you seen the way they decorate that place?"

Fox held up a half-eaten cupcake towards Morales. "You were going to tell me about networks?"

She nodded. "I'm sure you've got plenty of experience schmoozing, and you've no doubt discovered that some people are so well-connected that you can almost guarantee they'll have a contact in whatever group you're trying to get some information about. It's all just the natural result of growing a network, of adding each new link based on whether it's likely to get you closer to where you want to end up. When you ask that well-connected person to help, you're adding yourself to her node on the network, and that makes it easier for someone else to locate you."

He shrugged. "There's nothing new about that."

"What's new is what we've learned about how these networks operate. For instance, they're useful in modeling the spread of disease—"

"Or of an idea," Derek added.

"Especially if the idea acts like a conceptual virus," she agreed. "But what I found most interesting was how the distributed research effort we instigated hangs together. Since they use the Internet to share their ideas and suspicions, we end up with a kind of planet-wide mental foam."

"Ick," Melissa said, "like the Blob?"

"Anyway, since you two know Barry Lieber, you're both part of the research network as well, if only to help him pass information along, or to find someone that he needs to speak with."

"Of course, networks can also work against you," Derek said. "I'm sure that group accusing people of being damned has a network as well."

"Speaking of them," Fox said, it might be a good idea to see what they're up to. How about we check the news before you and Melissa head back home?"

Derek snagged another cupcake before following them into the living room. By the time he walked in, Fox had already switched on one of the news channels. They were playing a hand-held video taken during a street clash in Naples. The tourist taking the pictures described the action and translated signs carried by the protesters being rounded up by what he described as an Italian military support team.

"What began as a peaceful demonstration — friends and families of Burnout Fever victims asking for government assistance — turned violent when another group surrounded them, broke through their ranks, and began to beat them with clubs. According to the people I've spoken with, these militant counter-demonstrators have turned the US's binary stance against terrorists to a new use, claiming that anyone protecting the damned was damned as well. A little while ago, the Italian Army arrived in urban combat vehicles, and began to separate the factions."

The news anchor took over. "Similar events are playing out around the world. Martial law has been declared in a number of cities. The bloodiest incidents occurred in predominantly Islamic nations, where divine retribution

appears to have a far more potent influence over human affairs than in areas with a broader mix of faiths.”

“But because Burnout Fever honors no religious distinctions, the kind of effect that it has on a culture is likely to draw on whatever repressed disputes there might be, drawing people into conflicts over seemingly unrelated issues. Accusations and counteraccusations about the cause and meaning of the growing problem are making it increasingly difficult for the authorities to maintain order.”

“Turning to the political ramifications of the situation...”

Morales swallowed hard. “This is unbelievable. Some obscure preacher claims that a new disease signals the end of the world, and now the world is trying to prove him right.”

Fox turned it off. “I don’t understand. How did all this happen so fast?”

“Network effects,” Derek said, putting his still-uneaten cupcake on the coffee table. “Ideas can spread like viruses. The difference is that viruses don’t pick up emotional context along the way like ideas can.”

“But...” Melissa looked at him, then at Morales. “But how can you stop a plague?”

“Past a certain point, you can’t. All you can do is treat those who have it, try to slow its spread, look for a cure, and hope that it burns itself out.”

“Burns itself out?” Fox asked.

“Yes. Once it’s affected everyone, it can’t do any further damage. Some people will show a natural immunity, others will be able to recover, either because of some form of treatment, or for some other reason. It’s like a forest fire after all the trees have been turned to cinder. No more fuel; no more fire.”

“But isn’t there any way to defuse the situation? To stop this idea virus from doing any further damage?”

Derek nodded. “There might be. McQuarry started all this. He might be the only person who can stop it.”

Chapter Fifteen

Melanie was already up and dressed by the time Barry opened his eyes on Sunday morning. It had been a hellacious week for him, just not the kind McQuarry might have meant. In the seven days since the Internet Reverend had incited a divine war on sufferers of Burnout Fever, more than just martial law had been declared. Every time someone even remotely in the public eye was either reported or accused of having Burnout Fever, another wave of reactions was set off. But for some reason, broadcast stations and the press had both given up trying to make much sense of it. Instead, their reporters had fallen to simply reciting statistics and press releases. One thing they didn’t report on was how many of the disputes raised by the unintended results of McQuarry’s last sermon were being defused by people like Barry.

He sat up in bed and listened to the energetic mix of music and voices coming from the living room. Melanie was watching “Bell, Book and Candle” again, and had reached a frenetic sequence that takes place in the Zodiac Club, a hangout that reminded him of the final sketch in her series of angel drawings.

As he showered, Barry recalled how, in the movie, James Stewart’s character had reacted to discovering that his infatuation with Gillian Holroyd was due to a spell she’d cast on him. Fear was a powerful force. It could move people towards life or to death. A frightened person could use it to survive a terrifying ordeal, or to create one for someone else. It also had a way of bringing people together, but it didn’t dictate how those groups might behave. Some would lash out blindly at their real or imagined enemies; others would band together to combine their resources and search out a way to quell the fear.

It was this latter possibility that had kept him so busy for the past several days. And from what he’d read last night on one of the email discussion groups he subscribed to, even people

without formal training in negotiation were being pressed into service. That made those who knew what they were doing, people like Barry, all the more valuable. He'd been asked to coach several newcomers to the field, to prepare them for what looked like it would become an unending series of increasingly vocal negotiations, and decided that under the circumstances they'd better stay in close contact with one another. At the moment, that meant keeping up with the email group, but he wondered how long it might be before the human chaos might encroach on the virtual world as well, and they'd have to find other ways to stay in touch.

When he put on his watch, Barry realized that it was nearly time for McQuarry's sermon, so he headed to the living room to find out whether Melanie wanted to hear what he had to say. "Hi Mel. Have you decided yet?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Oh," he said sheepishly, "I forgot. Did you want to watch McQuarry this morning?"

She looked back at the movie.

Telling your audience that they've been damned wasn't the best strategy for gaining mindshare, but then nobody had ever accused McQuarry of being concerned about the size of his flock. Nevertheless, so much attention had focused on him during the past week that it was no longer necessary to visit his website just to watch the sermon. From what he'd read, a local broadcaster in Northern California had arranged a satellite uplink, and it was going to be relayed through one network and two all-news channels.

"Look," he said, sitting beside her, "I know how much he's hurt you by what he said last week, but it's not just you that I'm worried about. I've met a lot of people that have been affected by this in one way or another. You've transcribed interviews about most of them. I don't know what he plans to say this morning, but it's going to affect a lot of people that I care about."

Melanie paused the movie, leaving James Stewart on a rooftop, in the midst of tossing his hat to the wind under the witch's love spell. "He said I was damned."

"I know. But if you are, then so are a lot of other good people, like Congresswoman Haekson. Derek said that his girlfriend's Aunt Lilly got it during a committee meeting she was chairing, and now her father's taking a lot of heat for having taken over her role. According to what McQuarry said, he's one of the replacement players in god's latest drama. Would you mind if we watched?"

She bit her lip and sighed. "Okay."

While waiting for the satellite feed from Shasta Lake, the reporter filled some airtime with a roundup of related events. In a frame to his right, they scrolled a list of cities around the world in which martial law, or its rough equivalent, had been declared, and intercut with brief glimpses of both the violence and the faces of those imposing order.

"In short," he concluded, "the world seems to have come unraveled, and all because of a short speech one week ago by a previously obscure preacher from California, a man whose message was carried around the world both by word of mouth, and by the power of the Internet. This week, however, things are somewhat different. Dr. Wilfred McQuarry isn't speaking just to his small group of followers, but to the whole world. Let's listen."

The reporter turned to watch a monitor out of frame. As he did so, a window appeared beside him. In it flew a flamboyant version of McQuarry's winged 'A' logo.

Melanie pressed closer to Barry, and he put his arm around her. "I don't like it. It's wrong." "What is?"

She pointed at the screen and sighed.

The new logo faded to McQuarry's chubby face. Some changes had been made behind the scenes as well. He'd gotten a haircut, and he was no longer standing in front of a blank wall. Today's talk was being done outside, with Shasta Lake in the background.

"Good morning," he squeaked. "I'm so happy that you could all join me for today's sermon."

Barry smiled. Until now, he'd thought that the grating quality of the man's voice was purely a matter of being heard through tinny speakers and the compression of a webcast. Now it was clear

that the technology had nothing to do with it. He really did squeak.

“Last time,” he said, glancing awkwardly at whatever was happening beside the camera, “we talked about how people who are ignoring their Angels and not playing their roles in the Great Drama are being replaced by the divine casting director. God’s will is to complete the cycle as it was intended, and we have seen the results all around us this past week. Some of the players in the Great Drama are ordinary people, no different from you or me. Others are in positions of power: political leaders, writers and teachers, people who control vast businesses, actors and directors.”

Barry kept expecting McQuarry to raise some prop or other into frame while he spoke, but nothing happened.

“But other forces are at work as well, and some of them are already playing their parts in the story. Many things have been said this past week about what is happening. Some have attributed additional meaning to my words that does not exist. Others have chosen to slander the word of God, to claim that what he has done is evil. Many of you are wondering why this is, wondering why the almighty would choose to permit this to happen. But the truth is that he is not allowing it, but rather he is reveling in the fervor with which those chosen to play in this drama are fulfilling their roles.”

Melanie looked away, then pressed her eyes closed and sniffed.

“Look to those who have fallen, and to those who have replaced them. Examine the differences between them, and understand why one was damned and the other chosen. These are the players; these are the ones whose actions in the coming days will determine how the drama plays out.”

McQuarry raised his arms into view, gesturing broadly. “Much has been said this past week about what the Great Drama is really about, and about why it is so important that it be completed properly. As I have said before, the Rapture is upon us, and judgment waits for us all. Those not already damned still have time, but not for much longer. Just as the US has challenged the secular world to choose between terror and freedom, so the almighty has laid out for us a choice between good and evil, of being blessed or damned. And just as—”

McQuarry stood there for a moment, frozen in place, looking as if the satellite transponder had choked on its frame buffer. Only the ruffling water behind him, and a few stray birds flying through the sky broke the illusion. Then, very slowly, he turned his palms inward and looked at them. A few seconds later, the logo reappeared.

The reporter tapped his earpiece and turned back towards the camera. “We’re not sure what just happened, possibly some kind of technical problem.”

While the TV blathered on, attempting to fill the suddenly dead air with speculations, Barry clicked it off and looked at Melanie. She sat there, frozen in place, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Part 2: Religious Wars

Chapter Sixteen

Barry glanced at the congested taxiway before answering. He'd been having trouble all day, his concentration split between the negotiating session he'd been asked to mediate and the possibility that Melanie wasn't as okay as she claimed to be.

After watching McQuarry's mid-sermon meltdown yesterday morning, she'd taken quite some time to calm down. Like striking a heated bar of iron in a magnetic field, Burnout Fever had aligned her world to his. She'd grabbed onto the angel wings of his theology and flown straight down the flaws in its logic to find a lonely man in a dark room staring into a flame. That had been the last of her sketches, but it wasn't the end of her journey. By mid-week, she'd taken to emulating the person she'd sketched, sitting for hours, late at night, her nose just inches from the candle.

He tried to keep her busy when he could, and convinced her to go down to UW to transcribe the interviews, rather than doing them at home. She said she enjoyed the people there, especially Leslie Omak, and by Friday it had become part of her comfortable routine.

"I'm sorry, David," he said, momentarily shaking the concern from his mind. "I was thinking about something else. Could you repeat the question?"

The Port of Seattle Air Traffic Control Manager, an affable Brit who insisted on friendly informality, frowned. "It's okay, Barry. I know you've got your own problems to deal with. Do you see any problem with that solution?"

Barry looked down and smiled at the juxtaposition of problems. McQuarry wasn't the only person affected Sunday morning. At the same time he had frozen while looking into the camera, Ted Walker, one of SeaTac's senior traffic controllers, sat back in his seat to watch the pretty blips walk across his screen like a colony of ants at rush hour. Unfortunately, the team was already short-handed due to other cases of Burnout Fever, and nobody noticed for nearly too long. Lacking proper guidance from the ground, two pilots negotiated their own evasive maneuvers and narrowly avoided a mid-air collision over Elliot Bay. Tourists watching the occasional floatplane over brunch in the Space Needle got a bit more of a thrill than they were expecting.

After calming the airspace, the other controllers requested a meeting to discuss changing some of their procedures, but since the situation demanded a rethinking of the rules under which they worked, Port management had suggested that an outside facilitator be present as well.

Barry had dropped Melanie off at UW before heading to the airport. She'd told him that she felt fine, and that she wanted to visit the library before going to the desk Omak had set up for her at Project Iris. He watched her walk away for a few moments before driving off.

She'd taken McQuarry's diagnosis of damnation seriously, but now, by his own lights, the preacher was damned as well. Barry fought a momentary wave of nausea at the thought of facing such a problem himself and getting sucked into a self-referential theological black hole. Perhaps, under the circumstances, he mused, not being able to shift contexts so easily was an advantage. Perhaps it shielded her from the implications of McQuarry's sudden demise.

He nodded at the ATC manager. "Yeah. I do. There's a lot of controversy about what Burnout Fever actually is. And while those with it are easily capable of handling well-defined tasks that don't involve sudden shifts of context, the possibility of Mr. Walker bearing even the slightest responsibility for the safety of the flying public can cause a great deal of trouble."

Several controllers started to speak at once. One of them, the woman who had taken over Walker's piece of the airspace and unraveled the airborne mess, rose from her chair. "Ted wasn't the first person we lost to this thing, but he was the best. I don't have any intention of allowing Port management to drop him like a hot potato, no matter what the neo-revelationists say."

David motioned for her to take her seat. "Please don't misunderstand me. I know that we have to balance concern for our staff against the safety of the skies, and I'm just as worried about Ted's family as you are, but we have to do this in a way that won't cause more trouble for us."

"Sure, David" she said sarcastically. "Politics is more important, isn't it."

"You know what I mean, Brenda. We may be out of sight, but after yesterday, we're in no way out of mind. You can be sure that the press is going to want to know what happened, and what we plan to do about it. The carriers using our airspace already want to know how we intend to prevent another, possibly deadly, incident." He pointed towards the window. "And the people waiting in those planes, as well as their friends and families, want to be assured that it's safe for them to fly."

"Look," Barry said, "we have several issues to deal with here. Can we set the employee

relations issue aside for a few minutes and get back to where we started this morning?" He looked at Brenda. "You've seen what happens when someone gets Burnout Fever. So have I. And we all know how dangerous it is for a controller to freeze up, no matter what the reason. This morning, you suggested a kind of buddy system, pairing up controllers to watch one another's back so another case would be spotted a lot more quickly."

David shook his head in annoyance. "And we also discussed how busy my people are already. Expecting them to keep track of even more planes is just asking for trouble. There are just so many things a person can handle at one time."

"Exactly. And of all professions, yours is probably the most reliant on people's ability to shift contexts. So what I think you're really asking for is more staff."

The airport facilities manager, who had kept patiently quiet until now, threw up his hands. "And how do you expect us to be able to afford them? Controllers aren't like burger-flippers, you know."

Another controller raised an accusatorial finger at him. "You're not suggesting that Ted's only good for that kind of work, are you?"

"Please," Barry said, "calm down. That remark may have been said badly, but I think there's a piece of wisdom in it. Burger flipping is a simple, well-defined job. It can be done by someone without special training, even by a person with Burnout Fever. I've been helping someone with Burnout Fever adjust to it, and I've learned some things about how to deal with their new limitations. I think there's a way to look at the job you have to do that creates a role that someone in Mr. Walker's state can handle."

Nobody said anything for a few seconds. Then a few people softened their posture and leaned forward a bit.

"You say you want some kind of buddy system, and that you want Mr. Walker to still be part of the team. Here's my suggestion. If you can set up a station, outside the ATC office, where he can see the action on your screens, he can watch for the kind of alert conditions that signal an impending problem. He wouldn't be responsible for directing aircraft, and it doesn't matter whether he makes the connection between the symbols and the planes. All he would have to do is report the problem. He'd be acting as a kind of back-up monitor for the rest of you. Now I'm not saying that you shouldn't also institute the buddy system among the floor staff, but this does solve some of your problems."

During the free-for-all that followed, Barry realized that his cell phone was vibrating, so he pulled it out to check the caller-ID. A call from UW Security seemed urgent, so he quietly said, "I'll be right back," and excused himself.

It was Melanie. She was breathless. "I think I'm in trouble, Barry. I didn't mean to break it, but they were yelling at me, and I—"

"Are you okay?" he asked, once the door was closed.

"I just told you I'm in trouble. Didn't you hear me?"

"I meant," Barry closed his eyes and silently groused at the effects of Burnout Fever, "have you been injured?"

"No, nothing's broken. But I think they've called the police."

"Police? What happened? What did you break?"

"I didn't mean to, Barry. It's just that they kept calling Wilfred an idiot."

"You mean Dr. McQuarry? Look, I think my meeting here is just about over. I'll see if I can get away. Where are you now?"

"I'm at UW, of course. Where did you think I was?"

He shook his head, trying to maintain composure. "No. I mean where at UW are you?"

"I was in Leslie Omak's office when it started, but they've put us in separate rooms until the police get here. The security guy loaned me his phone."

"Sep—?" He glanced across the atrium and noticed two people watching something happening in an alcove a few dozen yards to his left. "I don't understand. They put who into separate offices, Melanie? Look. Just stay where you are and I'll come pick you up, okay?"

When Barry opened the conference room door, nobody even looked up. The group's factions had dissolved, and the controllers were now gathered around David, who appeared to be doing a bit of one-seat collaborative computing. In other words, he was frantically trying to keep up with a blizzard of questions and suggestions, typing away as fast as he could on the laptop he'd brought. The facilities manager had gotten up and was gazing out the window, his relaxed posture reflecting the mood in the room. From the look of it, they'd found a path to a solution, and were now

working out the fine details. Satisfied that he was no longer needed, he grabbed his coat and left.

By the time he'd slipped his left arm through his coat sleeve, Barry realized that a TV news crew was heading towards him. Unfortunately, the suspended upper-level walkway he was on only had one exit, which meant he'd have to get past them before he could leave the airport. Slowing to buy some time to think, he finished slipping his coat on and took a breath.

"Mr. Lieber," the reporter said as she approached, brandishing her microphone like a dagger, "is the meeting over?"

He stopped near the railing. "Not yet. They're working through the details of the solution they've agreed on."

"Can you tell me anything about that decision?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm just here to facilitate their meeting. I can't really speak for the Port of Seattle or for the Air Traffic Controllers."

The reporter thought briefly. "Okay, then can you say anything about the tone of the meeting? Was it civil, or were the sides belligerent?"

He nodded. "Quite civil. ATC management is very concerned about both the flying public, and about the families of their employees. Now if you'll excuse me, I have—"

"Just not about their immortal souls!" bellowed the closest of three people storming towards them.

The reporter lowered her microphone and turned to assess the interruption. Her cameraman spun around to catch the action. "What are you talking about?" she asked the leader.

"It's no secret," he said sharply, "that yesterday's incident was caused by Damnation Fever. That controller—"

"Yeah, right," Barry said, his mind still on Melanie. "First McQuarry says that anyone with Burnout Fever is damned, and now he's got it. That kinda puts a crimp in his theology, doesn't it? So who's your authority now?"

By this time, the leader had stopped a few nose-lengths from Barry, and the other two, a young man and a woman in her fifties, flanked the reporter. He shook his head disparagingly. "McQuarry was just a messenger. It doesn't matter what happened to him. He played the role he was meant to. Now it's up to the rest of us to carry out God's plan."

"Oh give me a break," Barry said. "So according to you, McQuarry's reward for revealing God's plan was to be damned?"

The reporter pushed her microphone closer to the interloper. "Are you part of Dr. McQuarry's group?" she asked.

"Of course not," he said, warming to the attention. "The Shasta Lake commune was a means to God's ends, a way to start things off."

"Then who are you, and who do you speak for?" she asked, trying to divert the confrontation.

Happily extracted from the action, Barry slipped away and started down the stairs. The last he heard of the interview before the crowd below drowned it out was a loud accusation by the leader as someone else left the meeting.

Curious about how the incident was being covered, he tuned into the reporter's AM-radio talk show station after leaving the airport parking lot. The host was polling listeners' opinions about whether it was safe to fly, and getting a number of irate responses from people convinced that the Port of Seattle was engaged in some kind of cover-up. By the time he started climbing the hill beside Boeing Field, it was obvious that the tone of the discussion was getting sharper. His attention was drawn away from the radio, however, by something he saw on the tarmac.

Anyone who regularly drove past the airport on Interstate 5 was used to seeing a variety of odd-looking aircraft parked in front of the hangars. This was where the company ran test flights of new commercial aircraft, where newly built ones were painted, and where old planes were brought for overhauls. But it was also where a menagerie of specially modified military planes was serviced, so it wasn't unusual to see an occasional AWACS radar platform there as well. And from time to time, even Air Force One was known to drop by.

Today, however, the field was empty. Clearly, something out of the ordinary had happened in the support facility that worked on all those planes, yet not a word of it had made it into the news. He was still wondering about what might be going on when he caught his first glimpse of the Space Needle, and realized that his name had just been mentioned on the radio.

"—was instrumental in leading the sides in the negotiation towards a solution that they were all satisfied with. Now that the meeting is over, we're told

that the Port of Seattle is going to implement a plan that teams up traffic controllers in a way that will prevent a recurrence of yesterday's near-collision over Elliot Bay."

Barry was pleased to hear that his presence had helped to resolve the dispute. Even though the point of being in meetings like that was to help keep the sides focused on achieving a useful result, there had been times that he'd served more as a common enemy than as a peacemaker. It all depended on the strength of the emotions that each party brought to the table, and how large a part those emotions played in their understanding of the issues and of their opponent's position. Fortunately, in this case, everyone was ultimately focused on a higher goal, the safety of the flying public, and that made all the difference.

"While this reporter was speaking with the ATC manager outside the meeting room, he was challenged by three people to prove that the traffic controller who took ill yesterday was not damned. When he tried to push past them, the leader grabbed his arm and attempted to restrain him. At that point, two of the air controllers in the meeting separated them, and then corralled the three into the meeting room to wait for a team from SeaTac Security."

When the talk show host then asked his listeners to call with their opinion on the question, Barry switched off the radio and drove on with only the sound of the road and the light rain for company.

After parking in the UW Medical Center's garage, he rode the escalator up to ground level, crossed the lobby and headed down the seemingly infinite hallway that led through the various buildings of the facility. Along the way, he caught snatches of discussion about some kind of incident at the Project Iris office.

"I can't believe it," one passerby grouched to her companion. "How could they allow someone with that to work right here in the med center? It could be contagious!"

"Yeah," another said. "But even if it's not, I hear they all get violent like that."

Barry quickened his pace and set his mind on what might have happened to Melanie. As he got closer, he realized that a crowd had formed at the intersection with the project's corridor, and one of the people in the crowd was wearing a blue uniform. The police had already arrived.

"What do you think they're going to do?" someone watching the crowd from a doorway asked his neighbor.

"The damage has already been done," the other said, glancing uncomfortably down the hall. "They don't have much choice now, do they?"

When he reached the intersection, Barry made his way through the crowd to the officer, who was talking to someone on her radio.

"Not yet," she said, looking around at the crowd. "Most of them just want to know if anyone was hurt in the fight. I'll let you know."

"Excuse me," Barry said when she lowered her radio. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She looked at him briefly, and then nodded. "There was a fight, and some equipment was damaged. Now, if you don't have any business on this hallway, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Barry looked towards the Project Iris office. "I think my wife was involved. She said UW Security was holding her for questioning. May I go in to see her?"

The officer shook her head. "I'm sorry sir, but we haven't finished speaking with everyone back there yet, and the university hasn't decided whether to press charges. Stay in the area, and I'll let you know when you can go through."

"Thanks."

While the officer resumed managing the crowd, a particularly heated exchange between two people wearing lab smocks and UW staff IDs caught Barry's attention, so he stepped closer to listen.

"—all damned according to Dr. McQuarry."

"But then, so was he," the man replied incredulously. "Didn't you see his meltdown yesterday morning?"

"Like I could miss it?" she said. "They've been running that clip endlessly all day. But what does that prove?"

"That he's full of crap."

Barry's attention was suddenly diverted by a voice beside him. "Sir?" It was the officer.

"Yeah?"

She lowered her radio. "Are you Barry Lieber?"

He nodded. "What's wrong?"

She raised it again. "Yeah, it's him. We'll be there in a moment." Then, to Barry, "They've been having trouble taking a statement from Miss Stroub. Please come with me."

As they approached the knot of people outside Leslie Omak's Project Iris office, Barry looked over the debris on the floor across from it. A metal equipment cart lay on its side near the remains of some sort of tabletop lab gear. Around it was a scattering of parts, mostly bits of plastic and glass. Raising his gaze, he saw that there was also a deep gouge in the wall at about four feet off the floor. The gouge, however, sent a chill up his spine, because it was stained with what looked like blood. Whatever had happened here, it didn't look good.

"Mr. Lieber?" another officer said as they reached the doorway.

He nodded. "I think I may be able to help."

"Apparently, Miss Stroub got into a dispute with some visitors to this office. We've been unable to get a coherent statement from her."

"I'm not surprised," Barry said. "She's got Burnout Fever."

"Ms. Omak told us that before she was brought down to Emergency."

He sucked a breath. "Leslie's been hurt?"

"Yes, sir, but not as badly as the two people that Miss Stroub attacked."

Barry winced. "So how can I help?"

"Well, we still need to get a statement from her, and she's been asking for you. At the moment, she's stewing in what we're told is the interview room. That's next door, where that equipment was being delivered to." He indicated the hallway debris. "If we can't get a complete statement from her here, we'll have to take her down to the station and try again after she's been processed in."

He swallowed hard, afraid of what might happen if Melanie were subjected to the chaos of a night in jail. "Okay. Let's go. I'll see what I can do."

While the officer who had brought him over returned to the crowd still blocking the intersection at the main corridor, Barry followed the second one into the room where Melanie was being held. She was sitting in the kind of padded chair usually reserved for guests, rocking slowly and rubbing the cover of a book between her hands while staring blankly at nothing.

"Melanie?" he said gently as he sat beside her.

She stopped rubbing the book and looked at him.

"Is this the book you wanted to get at the library this morning?"

She looked down at it. "Uh huh."

He put his hand over hers. "May I see it?"

When she released her grip, he turned the book over and read the cover. "What happened, Mel?"

"They attacked me." Her tone was dark, brooding.

"I think you're going to have to start at the beginning."

She looked at him angrily. "How many times do I have to go through this? First UW Security asks, and then the police, but nobody listens. Every time I start to answer, they ask questions about something else. I'm really tired of this, Barry."

"I know you are, but they need to know what happened. Look, I have an idea. I'll be right back."

"Okay."

He rose and joined the officer by the door. "How was the questioning carried out?"

He shrugged. "The usual way. We break the incident down into a series of parts — people, events, dialog — things like that — and then ask about each one in turn. There are certain things we need to know, but witnesses usually want to inject an awful lot of personal information into the account, so we have to help keep them on topic. This method helps to sort that all out. Why?"

Barry nodded towards Melanie. "She has Burnout Fever. I don't know how much you know about it, but the important thing here is that she's not very good at changing contexts, an ability that's required using your methodology. If I help her through the statement, and we record it, could someone pull out the details you need afterwards?"

The officer thought for a moment. "Yeah, I suppose. If that's the only way we can find out

what happened here.”

“Great.” He turned around. “Mel, do you have that cassette recorder with you?”

She nodded and pulled it out of her pack.

The officer watched while Barry took a seat opposite Melanie, set the device down between them, and pressed Record.

“All right,” he said, “this is an interview with Melanie Stroub, conducted in the presence of officer...” He turned around.

“Cavanaugh”

“...in the presence of Officer Cavanaugh of the Seattle Police. There was an incident earlier today in the office of Project Iris at the University of Washington. Miss Stroub was present.” He paused. “Melanie, I’d like you to think back to before all this happened and tell me everything that you remember about it. If I need to ask you any questions, they will only be about what you’re telling me. We won’t jump around. Will that be okay?”

“I think so, Barry. Where should I begin?”

“You went to the library before coming here. Start with that.”

“I showed my drawing to the librarian.” She reached into her pack, fished out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to him.

Barry opened it and laid it down beside the recorder. “The sketch is of a bearded man seated at a table in a dim room, looking into a candle. The clothes, hair and décor look like a 50’s coffee house. Go ahead, Mel.”

“I wanted to know about the people and the time. She got me that book.”

Barry held up his hand for a pause. “Miss Stroub has indicated a copy of ‘A Coney Island of the Mind,’ by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. It was one of the seminal works in the Beat generation.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “I came here after that to ask Leslie how I could help out today. She said that she was expecting some new equipment to be delivered this morning. She was setting up a place to record interviews with people like me, people who have been... people with Burnout Fever.”

He raised a finger. “Do you know what kind of equipment that was?”

She nodded. “Yes, but I’m not sure why Leslie thought it was so funny. She said she already had a video camera for the interview room, but wanted to get vital signs as well. The machine that she laughed about was one for tracking eye movement. I think it uses a laser.”

Barry stifled a smile at the juxtaposition of iris tracking gear and the name of the teenager that the project had been named after.

“In the middle of telling me about how she’d gotten it, Leslie suddenly stopped talking and looked at something behind me. I remembered seeing McQuarry yesterday morning, and I thought that maybe she’d just gotten Burnout Fever herself. It scared me.”

He raised a finger again. “Dr. Wilfred McQuarry is the California webevangelist who said that Burnout Fever signaled damnation, rather than being just a new disease. McQuarry appeared to have gotten it during his webcast on Sunday. Onset looks like the person freezes briefly, and then forgets what they were doing.”

Melanie looked at him uncomfortably for a moment before continuing. “I turned around to see if she was really looking at something, and was relieved to find three strangers blocking the doorway.”

“What did they look like?” he asked gently.

“The one in the middle was a lean man about 30 years old. He had short hair and wore a black suit. The other two were stocky, probably around 25, and both of them had jeans and t-shirts.”

Barry thought for a moment. It seemed there was at least one advantage to not spending so much mental energy switching contexts. Before she’d gotten it, Mel was usually so busy exploring the implications and connections between things that she didn’t pay much attention to details like that. He’d have to speak with Omak about it later. “Go on.”

“Where was I?”

He smiled. “Three people just walked in.”

“Not really,” she corrected him. “The one in the suit was just inside the doorway, and the other two were a half-step behind. Anyway, when Leslie asked what they wanted, the guy snorted a bit, and then said that he wanted to stop us. I didn’t like that noise. It made me really uncomfortable.”

A raised finger. “Do you know why?”

She shook her head. "No. But I didn't want to get hurt, so I got up and stood beside Leslie's desk."

"What did she do?"

"When?"

He took a breath. "When they said they wanted to stop Project Iris."

"He made a speech. His tone changed, like he'd rehearsed this part. He said that since people with Burnout Fever were damned, Project Iris was enticing businesses to get in league with the devil by supporting us. Then he threatened us."

Officer Cavanaugh folded his arms and solidified his stance.

"What did he say?"

Melanie ran her palm over the sketch. "He said if Leslie didn't stop taking money and equipment from area businesses, he'd blow the whistle and expose us. His eyes got big, and he said he'd expose this whole nasty business for the demonic playground that it is." After a pause, she added, "He scared me."

"I know. What happened then?"

"Leslie got up and went around to the door. She told him that he was wrong, that Burnout Fever was just a disease, and that Project Iris was working on a cure. Then she told them to leave."

"Did they?"

"Hardly." She bit her lip. "That was when the equipment arrived. One of the two people delivering it stepped up behind the three men blocking the doorway and asked to go in. She said that she wanted to talk with Leslie. The guy on the right turned around and started yelling at her, accusing her of consorting with the devil's minions, telling her to take the equipment cart back where it came from." She sat back in her chair and looked down at her hands.

"Are you all right, Mel?"

She sniffed. "Leslie just stood there, so I told them to get out of the way."

"How?"

She looked at him briefly before answering. "I yelled. Well, I was upset." Her pace quickened. "I know that McQuarry said I was damned, but he was wrong. I have too been listening to my angel. In fact, that's why I got this book, to find out more about what she was telling me. So when he..." She stopped short, breathing raggedly.

Barry dropped out of inquisitor mode and stepped around the table to comfort her. "It's okay. I understand. We're just trying to find out what happened and why. Take your time. Do you need a break?"

Once she'd caught her breath, she looked up at him. "No. I'll be okay."

"Good." He resumed his seat. "I take it that things started to get out of hand right about then."

She nodded. "Leslie nudged me aside and went right up to the guy. She stood nose to nose with him, so I guess they were the same height. She ordered them to stand aside. The woman with the equipment told them to as well. She was a bit shorter than the guy in the suit, so I couldn't see her too well from where I was."

"What did they do?"

"The one on the left grumbled, 'Stupid bitch,' and pushed her. He told her to call the company footing the bill for the equipment and tell them to cancel it, to take it back. The woman behind them insisted that they step aside. She said she was Chris Monahan, the VP who had authorized the equipment, and that she had no intention of taking it back."

"I guess it was a pretty tense situation."

She looked over at Officer Cavanaugh, then back at Barry. "Uh huh. I could see that Mrs. Monahan had taken out her cell phone. She only pressed one button, so it was either a preset or she was calling 911. A second later, the guy in the suit grabbed it from her and smashed it against the metal doorway. She shook her head, and started berating him for resorting to violence. By this time I could see several other people out in the hallway. Two of them tried to get everyone to calm down. Another said he was going to get UW Security."

"What was Leslie doing?"

"Mostly, she kept saying, 'Come in and let's talk this through,' but nobody was paying any attention to her. She kept asking them questions, asking if they were doing this because of what McQuarry had said about Burnout Fever, about how they felt about what happened to him on Sunday morning. None of it helped, though."

"So...?"

"Well, one of them finally answered her. Sort of. He said that Wilfred was an idiot. He said that's why god struck him down. Well, I know that at least some of what Wilfred said was real, that he was right about the angels. It made me mad."

"And Leslie?"

"She asked him what McQuarry had done to deserve such treatment. He said..." she took a breath. "He said, 'That idiot should never have revealed the secret of God's plan.' He said that was why he had to be silenced, that telling people what was going on only gave the devil a way to subvert God's grand plan."

Melanie was quiet after that. She sat there, slowly rocking, and swallowing hard. Finally, she fixed her gaze on Barry and wet her lips. "Then he pointed at me. He said that I was dangerous and had to be stopped. That's when I attacked him."

"You...?"

She nodded. "I just ran at him. I don't remember what happened after that. I was just so mad. I must have hit him with my fists, because when the security guard pulled me off him my hands were still clenched and they hurt real bad."

Chapter Seventeen

Ronnie was nursing a mocha latte at a back table when Barry and Melanie walked into their favorite neighborhood hangout. He raised his cup to them in greeting and waved them over, glancing over at the shop's TV all the while.

The fact that Melanie didn't remember anything of the fight itself hadn't bothered Officer Cavanaugh nearly as much as the way she'd reacted to the sight of the bloody gash in the wall across from Omak's office. Or rather, the way she didn't. Melanie had paused to examine it as they were leaving, and acted like it was an exhibit at some grisly museum of mayhem. Even though she'd apparently been involved in causing the damage just hours earlier, she showed no signs of having any emotional associations with the incident. As they were leaving, Cavanaugh suggested finding a good counselor to help her deal with it, a concept that Barry found amusing under the circumstances.

While Melanie went to join their friend, Barry detoured to the counter to place an order. As he waited in line, he turned to watch the news broadcast that had so split Ronnie's attention. The reporter was doing a standup at Boeing Field, his rain-soaked hair blowing in a sudden gust of wind on the empty tarmac. At the moment, however, he was visibly fumbling, struggling to maintain an air of authority in the face of some unexpected announcement in his hidden earpiece.

"As a matter of fact," he answered the studio anchor, a brief frown clouding his face, "they did announce a reduction in force not too long ago. But in order to refurbish the mothballed planes now parked in the Mohave Desert, they will need to hire more workers. The two airlines returning those planes to service have contracted with Boeing to do whatever maintenance is required to satisfy FAA regulations, so this morning's shut-down of the production lines doesn't signal the demise of the Puget Sound economy, despite the dire warnings issued an hour ago at a joint press conference called by a coalition of industry unions."

"I said, 'Next!'" The voice was closer and more strident.

Barry reluctantly dragged his attention back to more mundane matters, and found the man behind the counter staring at him expectantly. Once he'd placed their order, he grabbed some flatware and walked to the back table.

"Aren't you supposed to be on contract somewhere, Ronnie?" he asked as he pulled out a chair.

"That was the theory. Unfortunately, reality intruded."

"I thought you said it was management?" Melanie said, confused.

"Both, I guess. It seems that one effect of losing staff to Burnout Fever was to teach at least some software project managers a lesson about reality. Before all this started, they assumed that they could predict the efficiency of a team by simply counting heads. Kind of a steady-state manpower universe."

Melanie sat back, looking a bit lost.

"So when the first one went BF on them, they ignored the implications to the schedule. Bad idea. The rest of the team sucked up the extra load, of course. Not that we had much of a choice, especially us contractors. Anyway, last Wednesday my bit-buddy — the guy I share a keyboard with when we're slinging code in three-legged-race mode — finished his two weeks of wait-and-see time. The verdict was BF, which made me a singleton in a doubles contract. Since the deal was for the pair of us, they ditched out on me."

Before Melanie had a chance to ask for a translation, the food arrived, so she and Barry dug into their sandwiches while Ronnie turned his attention back to the TV.

"I can't believe they're still running that clip," he said after finishing the last of his latte.

Barry, whose mouth was full of turkey salad pita, looked him a question.

"McQuarry." He shook his head. "Every time they do a story about the trouble his claims about BF have caused, they run the clip of him freezing up on camera again. This time it's gloating from yet another part of the Islamic world."

"Gloating?" Barry asked between bites.

"Yeah. From what I hear, they're rejoicing over some wrinkled cleric's contention that McQuarry was struck down for blasphemy; that Allah had acted to silence his pernicious ranting. It's getting pretty violent out there, especially in places where there was already friction between religious factions."

Melanie lowered her sandwich and looked calmly at Ronnie. "It's true what he says about Angels, though, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, doll," he assured her as a smile crossed his face. A moment later, he wordlessly excused himself to order another latte and ogle a rather attractive stranger who had just walked in.

She turned to Barry. "It is, isn't it?"

He nodded, and turned to look at the TV. The studio anchor described the incident at UW, and was about to switch to a location feed when a loud crack echoed through the restaurant.

Ronnie stood over the man he'd gone to schmooze, glaring down at him angrily and rubbing his hand. "I'll thank you to hold your tongue the next time you consider making an accusation like that."

"What was that about?"

Instead of answering, Ronnie pointed at the TV and bellowed, "Everyone quiet!"

According to the slug at the bottom of the screen, the serious-looking man standing behind a bank of microphones was Harvey Wood of the CDC. "We have an announcement to make," he said, glancing around at what was probably a large crowd of reporters. "Although we have not yet isolated the cause of what is commonly referred to as Burnout Fever, we have determined that the well-known cognitive effects of the condition are a result of a change in the functioning of the Limbic System, the portion of the brain that is responsible for attributing meaning to what we experience. While we do not yet know the mechanism for this effect, identifying the affected region of the brain is a giant step towards making that determination."

While everyone else was busy watching the report, the man that Ronnie had decked got up and brushed himself off. He stood stiffly, arms crossed, glaring angrily.

From off-screen, several reporters shouted questions, but the resulting cacophony was impossible to understand. Wood nodded and held up a hand. "I've been asked about the reason for the reports of simultaneous cases. Unfortunately, until we have found the mechanism, we will have no way to know if they were actually related. In the meantime, we are tracking all reported cases, and analyzing not only the timing and location, but the details of onset and behavior as well. We'll let you know more when we have something to say. Thank you."

"You're going to regret that," the injured patron said darkly.

Ronnie drew a breath. "Look, I don't know who you are, but I don't take accusations about my friends lightly."

"What's this all about?" Barry asked as he stepped closer.

"Well, look who we have here," the man said in surprise. "I've been looking for you, Mr. Lieber."

"Fine. You've found me. Now what do you want, and what did you say to Ronnie?"

He shook his head derisively. "I asked if he knew the bastard that had set so many businesses against God's work. What I want is to stop you."

"Stop me from what?"

"Do I have to spell it out? You've convinced businesses across the country to pony up support for Project Iris and the rest of the CDC's misguided attempt to thwart God's plan."

"What makes you think it's god's plan?" Melanie asked from behind Barry's right shoulder.

"Who are you?"

"One of the damned. Well?"

Barry turned around. "What are you doing, Mel?"

"Asking the man a question. Do you mind?"

"I don't know. Considering what happened at UW, you might want to sit this one out."

"I'm okay now. Really." She moved closer. "Well?"

"Okay," he said, a bit put off by the intrusion. "Dr. McQuarry laid it all out in his webcast sermons. God's angels guide us along paths that he wants us to follow. They get their orders from him, and together they direct the vast dramas that we take part in here on Earth."

"So you're taking Wilfred's word for it."

"Of course."

"And he said that when people ignore their angels, they're removed from the play. We see this as Burnout Fever."

He raised his hands. "Yeah. So what?"

"Then why did McQuarry get Burnout Fever yesterday morning?"

Barry smiled. Melanie may have lost the ability to switch contexts easily, but that hadn't affected her zealous pursuit of a logical argument.

When the man hesitated, she continued the attack. "By his own rules, it means that he's stopped following the guidance of his angel. So what part of what he said was God's will, and what part was his own?"

"You tell him, sister," Ronnie added.

"Don't give me that crap. All it means is that he's finished what he was sent here to do. Others have now taken the mantle of leadership."

"How convenient," Barry said. "And I suppose you're one of the newly anointed?"

"McQuarry said it himself. When a player's retired, look to his replacement. No, I'm not the leader."

"Then who is? And who are you?"

"Ever hear of Malcolm Jeffries? Well, I hadn't either until a few weeks ago. But let me tell you something. When God chooses a new leader, he does it for reasons that we know nothing about, reasons that only He can understand."

Barry chuckled. "If you mean the jerk I think you do, I'll second that. From what my friend Derek tells me, Malcolm is a firebrand opportunist. Last I heard, he was protesting the use of GMOs in DuraBars. So what business does he have leading some kind of new religious group?"

"I'm sure you've heard this before: God works in mysterious ways."

"Yeah," Melanie said, "or maybe you've just been taken in."

He glared at her briefly, then turned and stormed out. A cheer went up among the other patrons as the door closed behind him.

"Hey," Ronnie said cheerily into the sudden silence, "thanks for reminding me. Anyone want some chocolate? I'm buying."

While their friend was busy getting them each a time-release caffeine fix, Barry and Melanie sat down to finish eating. Unfortunately, a graying man in a soggy jogging suit standing nearby had other ideas.

"Judging from what they've been running on the news today, I'd say you two have been having a pretty busy day."

Intent on finishing his sandwich, Barry nodded rather than answering.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Might as well. It seems our business is public now, anyway."

Ronnie scattered chocolate bars around the table and joined them. "So what's your take on all this," he asked the newcomer.

He laughed. "I don't know. There's so much going on, but it all seems to come down to the question of what Burnout Fever really is."

Melanie studied the man while unwrapping her chocolate.

"For example, if what they say is true — if there really is some kind of religious reason for it — then according to what the CDC just announced, the limbic system could actually be the seat of religious experience."

Ronnie took a bite of chocolate. "That'd be pretty weird. I mean, if it were, then they'd have to add all the world's religions to the DSM IV. Shrinks would start diagnosing people as being Christian, and prescribing pills for it. Pretty silly, if you ask me."

"Maybe not," Barry said, happily joining the round of verbal ping-pong. "After all, who's to say what kind of meaning the limbic system associates with stuff. I think it makes perfect sense."

"I had...um, something else in mind," the man said uncomfortably.

"Oh?"

"Funding sources. If religion is a function of the limbic system, then wouldn't publicly-funded research about Burnout Fever be constitutionally prohibited?"

It took a while for him to get an answer. Finally, Barry pulled out his phone and placed a call.

"Hi Derek," he said after a moment. "I have a couple of questions for you."

"Barry buddy! Good to hear from you. You're not going to believe what's been going on around here."

"I might. Look, before we get to that, I need your opinion on something."

"Shoot."

"The CDC says that BF targets the limbic system, and McQuarry says it's a religious matter. Someone here just suggested that publicly funded BF research could therefore be considered a violation of the 1st Amendment. Any thoughts?"

"I guess that's been kind of a hot topic lately, Bar. There's some group going around accusing people of being damned. In fact, Melissa's Aunt—"

"I know who's behind it."

Silence. "You what?"

"Remember that guy Jeffries you told me about?"

"The idiot GMO protester? What about him?"

"It's him. He's the ringleader."

"Malcolm Jeffries? You've got to be kidding."

"Nope. One of his people just told me."

"Thanks. I'm sure Melissa's dad's going to want to know about that."

"Why's that?"

"I was about to tell you that Melissa's Aunt Lilly — Congresswoman Haekson — has BF, and she's been getting harassed by Jeffries' people. She got it while at a session with some folks from the CDC. Which means she's right in the thick of it."

"Ouch. So what do you think about this 1st Amendment idea?"

"It'll probably get traction on talk radio, but I doubt anyone will take it seriously. Hey, listen. I've got an appointment with Melissa's dad tomorrow. I'll see what he thinks about it, and let you know what he says. Okay?"

"Sure. Thanks. Catch you later."

Chapter EIGHTEEN

That night, while Melanie watched one of those slice-of-life movies that had seemed so

pointless to both of them before she'd fallen victim to BF, Barry grabbed his laptop and launched the news viewer.

A new discussion thread called 'Clan Burnout' had been started over the weekend. On Sunday morning, a raft of new cases was reported, and since the group used GMT as a time reference, someone quickly pointed out that they had all occurred at the same time. Since then, the group had been exchanging details about the patients, and what they could dig up about McQuarry, hoping to find some commonality.

Unfortunately, about the only thing they seemed to have in common was a tendency towards the kind of activities that stoked adrenaline. Most were ski nuts, but a few were roller-coaster fans, the air traffic controller was a weekend skydiver, and McQuarry reportedly liked to drive too fast. The most recent posts were getting into discussions of psychological behavior, and which parts of the brain might be involved in them. This tangent was triggered by the CDC's announcement.

He took a moment to check how Melanie was doing, and then started a new thread called 'Religious Overtones'.

'A new group has latched onto McQuarry's damnation idea and is busy harassing BF patients. One of them told me that the ringleader is an opportunist from Virginia by the name of Malcolm Jeffries. Prior to this, he'd been protesting GMOs in the food supply, but from what I know about him — which is only second hand — he's really in it for the power. He likes to put others at a disadvantage, and uses volunteer protesters to replicate his presence.'

'If you encounter someone from this group, don't feed their influence by confronting them violently. This is what they want, because it helps to draw attention to them. Instead, respond to their arguments calmly by pointing out the holes in their logic. His minions are following a script, and do not have the depth of understanding needed to field a real debate.'

'Another conflict I've spotted was actually instigated by the CDC's announcement. A man who accepted McQuarry's explanation concluded that the Limbic System must be the seat of religious experience. On this basis, he posits that publicly funded research is a violation of the 1st Amendment (to the US Constitution, for those of you from elsewhere). If this idea spreads, we can expect a legal fight to continue working the problem.'

Chapter NINEteen

Derek rose as the train began slowing for the Federal Center SW Metro station, and wondered why it was nearly deserted. Congressman Fox had asked him to come to the District for lunch Tuesday morning so they could discuss a committee investigation that he kept alluding to. From the oblique references Fox had made, he suspected that it had something to do with the effects of Burnout Fever on Congress.

Once on the platform, he glanced around in bewilderment before resignedly taking the escalator to street level. Considering how many congressional staffers normally flowed through this place, it seemed a bit strange for the station to be echoingly deserted, especially at lunchtime. Partway up, however, the feeling of unreality shattered as a small knot of wool-wrapped Washingtonians stepped on for the ride down, their hushed discussion reflected in the anxious looks he got as they passed.

By the time he reached the top, a trickle of trainward travelers had begun flowing down the escalator. Watching the surge of humanity begin to reassert its familiar pattern gave Derek the disconcerting feeling that he was watching some obscure metaphorical game of charades, as if someone were whispering incomprehensibly in his ear, whispering something that he was powerless to understand. It all gave him the feeling that he was dreaming, and that someone was struggling to wake him.

The thought of one of McQuarry's angels, or more graphically, Melanie's bedraggled angels screaming silently in his ear as he walked up 3rd Street towards Independence Avenue reminded him of the circle of sea nymphs holding up the top layer of the Bartholdi Fountain. He'd spent an afternoon in the park not long ago, just staring at them as if they were supposed to mean something. In the end, all he'd left with were the remains of his sandwich.

Rounding the corner onto Independence was, for Derek, like walking in on a play that had begun the second act while he was still waiting in the ticket line. The pavement ahead was blocked by what looked like about a dozen emergency vehicles, their flashing lights giving the façade of the Rayburn House Office Building a multi-colored staccato glow. Police officers stood calmly in the intersections, directing traffic.

By the time he reached the patchwork of gardens in Bartholdi Park, it looked like he'd missed whatever excitement there may have been. A police cordon surrounded the Rayburn building, Independence Avenue was blocked to through traffic, and the officers managing the scene appeared to be simply marking time with idle chatter. A colonnade of reporters did stand-ups along the temporary barricades on the sidewalk ringing the Capitol Building across the street from Rayburn, their sightlines carefully chosen to make it look like they were each alone on the scene. Even the crowd milling about on the Capital grounds was starting to disperse.

Crossing Independence to the US Botanical Garden for a better view, Derek continued towards Rayburn, noting the kinds of response vehicles parked along the way. Police were re-parking the seven deserted med-tech vans left ringing the main entrance, making room for something, he supposed. At the furthest ends of the cleared area were a number of police cars, as well as two hastily re-marked Homeland Security vehicles. While he milled through the crowd, however, another truck was waved through, a CDC mobile toxicology lab.

He stopped near a policeman watching the truck pull through. "Excuse me, officer. Can you tell me what happened?"

"We're not sure yet. That's why the med techs called in the CDC."

Derek remembered Dr. Morales, and looked around. "Don't they have an office around here?"

"Yeah. It's a few blocks down."

"Thanks."

After a moment's indecision, he scanned the row of reporters, and headed towards Amy Gratham, who was busy chatting with her cameraman.

She pointed at him tentatively as he approached. "Didn't I see you with Congressman Fox at the PanAgra 10K Run a few weeks ago?"

"You did. I'm Derek Boa. The Congressman's daughter is a friend of mine." He nodded towards Rayburn. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Although most of the people reported some kind of sudden respiratory problem, several asthmatics went into shock. The EMTs called in the CDC as soon as they noticed a sticky yellow resin on people's skin and clothes."

"A yellow resin? Do they know what it is?"

"Well, they seemed to have a pretty good idea, but refused to say anything specific until the CDC took a look. In the meantime, they've locked the doors. Nothing's happened for a while, now."

"Derek?" It was Dr. Morales.

"Oh, hi Elena!"

"Do you know if Arthur's all right?"

"No, I just got here myself. I did have an appointment to speak with him, but I guess that's not going to happen. Well, not in his office, anyway." He glanced at Gratham. "Look, I hear the EMTs said something about a yellow resin. Any idea what that might be?"

Before she had a chance to reply, the reporter signaled her cameraman to start taping, and raised her microphone. "I'm Amy Gratham of DC First News. And you are?"

"Not giving you an exclusive, for one thing. Stop taping, and we can talk off the record."

She nodded to her cameraman. "I take it you know something about this?"

"Yes. I'm with the CDC, but I'm not part of the antiterrorism team."

"And the yellow resin?"

She spoke quietly. "It could be T2 — trichothecene mycotoxin — a nasty fungal extract with a bit of a split personality. The UN wants to poison opium poppies with it, but you can also use it on people."

Gratham's eyes widened. "That would make this a bioterror attack, wouldn't it?"

"It could, if that's what it was." She indicated the toxicology lab truck. "But first we need to

make that determination.”

“Assuming that it is this T2 stuff,” Derek said, “what does it do to you? Can it kill?”

She watched the truck pull to a stop and nodded. “It could.”

Gratham moved closer. “What do you do? How do you treat it?”

“Soap and water will wash it off, clothes and surfaces need to be cleaned with bleach, and depending on how bad the exposure was, they might have to administer steroids. But if anyone went into shock, there’s not much we can do. That’s why the toxicology team needs to determine whether it really was T2.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the insights, Dr...?”

Ignoring Gratham’s play for an attribution, Morales turned and walked towards the CDC toxicology team. Derek followed.

“I’ve called Melissa,” she told him when he caught up to her. “She’s swinging by his townhouse to pick up Lilly and get a change of clothes for her father. They ought to get here pretty soon. Look, I’m going to be busy for a while. Keep an eye out for them, okay?”

“You have to ask?” he laughed grimly.

While Morales continued towards the CDC truck, Derek slowed, pulled out his cell phone, and rang Congressman Fox.

Chapter Twenty

The masked med tech kneeling beside Congressman Fox winced at the piercing trill. “Would someone please turn off his cell phone?”

A woman standing nearby shuddered under a fit of uncontrollable coughing, and strained to see through the tears that flooded her burning eyes. She stepped around them and unclipped the noisy unit from Fox’s belt. She held it close, trying to make out the markings on the buttons, then gave up in frustration, removed the battery, and put both pieces on his desk.

“Thanks. Can you tell me what happened, Miss...?”

“Jaclyn Owens. I’m the congressman’s administrative assistant.” She spoke between bouts of coughing. “I was over there, working on a document, when I had a coughing fit. I wasn’t alone. Anyway, I came in to see if my boss was okay, and found him like this.” She gingerly pointed to his face. “Why are his eyes bleeding?”

He shook his head gravely. A few seconds later, he rose and surveyed the scene, a look of dread peering out over the white filter that masked his gaping mouth. Congressional staffers leaned weakly against desks and walls, struggling for breath amid a welter of unexplained symptoms. The sound of someone painfully coughing up his breakfast echoed hollowly through the hallway. The tech looked down at Fox, and touched his mike.

“I have a congressman down with retinal bleeding,” he said. “That confirms it. We’re dealing with T2. The problem is that we’ve been exposed now, too. We can’t transport the patients ourselves. So now what?”

“T2? What’s...?” Jaclyn hugged herself and backed away.

“Well...” The lead EMT sounded unsure, and then was silent. “According to procedure, everyone’s got to be decontaminated before they go anywhere. I’ll have control set up a field tent outside.”

He held up a hand to calm her, and glanced out the window. “Are you sure, Bob? It’s kind of cold out there. Everyone’s going to have to strip before they get washed down. And they’ll need some clothes, too. Whatever they’re wearing will have to be treated with bleach.”

“We don’t have much of a choice. I’ll see what can be done. Now get back to work. We have a lot of people to check, and not a lot of time to do it.”

Chapter TWENTY-ONE

Derek looked past the crowd of emergency services workers gathered by the CDC truck, slowly raised his gaze to the fourth floor of the Rayburn Building, and wondered what was happening inside. He'd gotten Fox's voicemail and left a message. With not much else to do, he turned and walked back towards Bartholdi Park. Behind him, the police fanned out to the various news crews and used broad arm gestures to help explain how much space they were going to need cleared.

He pretty much had the park to himself, owing to the attraction afforded by the activity happening on the next block, so he stood by the rim of the fountain's reflecting pool to think. He returned the cast iron gaze of the nearest sea nymph, a Grecian female standing solidly on its pedestal, arms raised overhead seemingly to support the light-ringed basin on which rode the sculptor's three tritons. Below her shared pedestal were shells and turtles. Above the tritons, a stylized crown built in the shape of an ancient crenellated city wall. In a way, it all seemed structured to protect whatever lay inside that crown, or rather what Bartholdi imagined to be there.

The individual mythological references were self-evident, but Derek had always felt that Bartholdi's design was intended to reflect something deeper, that it said something significant about the universe itself. Yet no matter how much he thought about it, he could never get far enough inside the sculptor's mind to see what he'd meant by it.

Derek winced at a sudden juxtaposition of imagery, for Malcolm Jeffries had another mind that he couldn't get inside. When Barry had called yesterday to tell him about the man's latest power play, he'd been in exceptionally high spirits. The conflict exploration techniques that they'd developed for Constitutional Evolution had just been selected as the process model for a national assembly of public interest groups. Because opposition among groups supporting different positions on certain issues had led to not only public confusion, but to legislative stalemates as well, the organizers hoped to learn whether there were alternative ways of understanding the issues which might lead to an acceptable resolution, and an end to the destructive power struggles. Jeffries' predilection for sidetracking such conflicts into self-aggrandizing displays of faux leadership would likely draw him to the event. The idea of Malcolm Jeffries anointing himself the leader of such a coalition wasn't a comforting thought, to say the least.

He turned away from the fountain and looked back towards Independence Avenue, and at the procession of trucks lumbering past on their way towards Rayburn. He pulled out his phone and punched one of the speed dial numbers.

"Hi, Rodney. It's Derek. Listen I think we may have a situation brewing. Could you call Gisela, and meet me at my place around 6? I'll arrange for pizza."

"What about Elliot and Melissa? Should I get them, too?"

"No. Melissa is going to be busy. Her dad was in the Rayburn building when the bio attack happened."

"The what?"

"Check the news."

"And Elliot?"

He thought for a moment. "No, just the three of us. Okay?"

"Sure, Derek, but why? What's going on?"

"I'll fill you in over pizza. Gotta go."

Chapter Twenty-TWO

"Bob? Captain Mercer?" The EMT kneeling beside Arthur Fox released his throat mike and stood up to listen. He could hear the echo of coughs, moans and footsteps as people in the hallway made their painful way to one of the bathrooms, but so far no calls for help.

While swabbing Fox's eyes and blotting yellow resin from his skin, he'd given instructions to

the congressman's weary assistant, and asked her to tell the people in nearby offices what to do, but to yell if she found anyone unconscious or bleeding. She'd been gone for several minutes now, and it was beginning to look like the situation was at least controllable. Unfortunately, the lone voice of stability in his life right now, Captain Mercer's insistent calls for continuing status reports from the others in his crew, had gone silent.

The EMT left Fox's office and headed left towards the stairwell that Mercer had designated as their base point, the primary evacuation route and coordination area. Everyone had fanned out from here, and Mercer was supposedly nearby.

"Captain?" he said calmly into the mike. "Captain Mercer?" Still no response.

A few people had gathered near the stairwell, as they had been directed to, and were awaiting further instructions. Others were converging on the area. After checking several nearby offices, he stepped into the stairwell and looked around. Mercer was sitting on the lower landing, huddled into the corner and carefully picking at the bits of yellow resin stuck to the floor around him.

"Bob?" he said as he approached. "Are you okay?"

Chapter Twenty-THREE

"Pardon me," Lillian Haekson repeated, her voice cracking this time.

"What do you want?" The harried officer turned suddenly, disrupting the conversation he'd been having with a lean man flashing a Homeland Security ID.

Melissa glanced at her Aunt Lilly, who had hesitated, and then stepped closer to the wooden barricade. "This is Congresswoman Haekson," she asserted, hoping to achieve the kind of believability that her father's old friend managed to pull off when she assumed some character or other. "Dr. Morales of the CDC is expecting us. May we go through, please?"

The police line had been pushed back past the walkways on the Capitol grounds, and along Independence Avenue beyond Bartholdi Park. Traffic lights in the area had been disabled to reduce confusion, and officers were busy making way for the line of equipment trucks that had begun to arrive. The officer they had interrupted was directing several others, which was why they had chosen him to ask for passage.

"Who?"

"Dr. Elena Morales. She's here briefing Congress on the situation, and Congresswoman Haekson has to speak with her. Now!" Melissa hoped that her intentionally vague explanation would be misinterpreted properly.

The officer motioned for them to wait, and turned away to speak to someone on his radio. A few moments later, he glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "Okay. You can come through."

Dr. Morales was red-faced, arguing vehemently with a fire chief when they spotted her in front of the main doors of the building. As they got close enough to make out her voice above the din, she threw up her hands in frustration. "How many times do I have to tell you? Captain Mercer is sick! He's got Burnout Fever. That's why he's so intent on cleaning the steps before allowing people to come downstairs! Yelling at him is not going to do any good."

"What's going on Elena? How's Arthur?" Haekson said calmly, startling her.

She took a breath. "I'm glad you could get down here, Lillian. He's in—"

"Look," the fire chief cut her off. "We don't have time for this. The field decontamination unit is going to be ready in a few minutes, and one of my men won't let anyone leave his floor. I don't care who you are or what you want. It'll just have to wait!"

Haekson pushed closer. "No it won't."

Melissa backed up, afraid of getting in someone's way, and bumped into Derek.

Morales tried to block Lillian. "It's okay. He'll be fine. But we really do have to—"

Haekson pushed her away and glared at the fire chief. "Let me speak with him."

He held the mike against his chest. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't let you use our com gear to chat with anyone, even another member of Congress."

She reached towards it. "I said, let me speak with him."

Morales grabbed her wrist and forced her arm down. "He's right, Lillian. Arthur's in no condition to—"

Haekson shook free and leaned close. "Not Arthur. The EMT."

"What?"

"You said he had Burnout Fever. I think I can help."

Morales straightened in surprise. "You what?"

Haekson glared, and turned towards the fire chief. "I know what he's going through. Let me talk to him!"

Morales threw up her arms. "But it's only been a week since you—"

Haekson sucked in a breath. "I'm okay. Really."

Melissa pushed between them. "Look, Dr. Morales, I think I know my Aunt Lilly better than you. If she says she's okay, I believe her."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Melissa, but you're hardly qualified to be making any kind of medical evaluation. This is a—"

"It's not about medicine," Melissa relented. "It's about roles."

Morales and the fire chief both stared at her uncomprehendingly.

Haekson smiled. "Thank you, dear." She opened her palm to the fire chief. "Now that I have the floor again, would you hand me the mike?"

"Wait a minute," Morales said. "What do you mean, Melissa?"

"It's always been her strength, her way of dealing with the world."

"What is?"

She took her aunt's free hand. "Playing roles. That's how Aunt Lilly's always dealt with impossible situations. She goes in as if she's the one with the answer, and somehow finds it. It's how she and my dad first met. It's why she's so powerful in meetings. And I think it's why she needs to speak with that sick EMT. Come on, give her a chance."

Lilly still held her hand out for the mike. "Well?"

Morales shrugged in resignation. "Go ahead. Let her try."

When the fire chief relinquished the mike, she said, "Thank you," and glanced up at the building. "What did you say his name was?"

"Bob. Captain Mercer."

Melissa stepped back to join Derek, and waited to see what happened. After a moment, Haekson grew very calm and lifted the mike. "Captain Mercer?" she said evenly, "this is Lillian Haekson. You don't know me, but I know what you're going through, and I think I can help. Let me tell you a story. Can you hear me?"

The radio was silent for a while, and then it crackled to life. "I'm busy." The voice was low and slightly muffled.

The fire chief nodded and said quietly, "He's wearing a breathing mask."

"I know you are, Bob. I don't want you to stop what you're doing. I know how important it is to you. I just want you to listen to me while you do it. Will that be okay?"

Another silence. "Okay."

"Good. About a week ago, I was in a meeting. Just like you, I had so many things to keep track of that I don't know how I thought I could do it all at once. Just thinking about it still gives me a headache. Then, something happened. I don't know why or how, but the world suddenly sorted itself out in front of my eyes. In a way, it was like waking up into a state of deep meditation, like going to a place where only the one important thing mattered, and everything else just flew away. I found it very restful. In fact, being focused on that one important thing made me feel so at ease that I couldn't tear myself away from it, like I was flowing along with it, becoming a part of it. Do you know what I mean?"

She looked at Melissa while waiting for an answer.

Finally, there was a click. "Yes."

"Good. Now I know how important what you're doing up there must be, but there are other things that have to be done as well. Your team can handle most of it, but the most important thing is still up to you." She paused and lowered the mike.

"Where are you going with this?" Morales asked quietly.

"He has to relinquish control. Who's his backup?"

"Ted," the chief said. "Ted Bartok. He's the EMT who treated Congressman Fox."

She nodded and lifted the mike again. "I understand that Ted Bartok is in there with you."

"That's right."

"There's something I want you to do for me, Captain Mercer. I've spent the past week learning about my new ability to focus so well, and I've discovered something important."

"Oh? What's that?"

She smiled at his increased involvement in the discussion. "Once I understood that I could focus on only one thing at a time, I began to pay more attention to how that one thing was framed."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I at first. It's like a camera."

Morales glanced perplexedly at Melissa.

Haekson took a breath. "I started imagining that I was seeing the world — that I was seeing the things I had to do — as if they were in the viewfinder of a camera. Since I could take a picture of only one thing at a time, it was important to make that picture a good one. In other words, if I was going to have to focus on doing one thing at a time, it was important to choose that one thing carefully. That's what I want you to do right now."

"But we're trapped," Mercer said, fear coloring his tone. "Unless I clear the stairs, nobody will be able to leave."

"That's what I mean," Haekson told him gently. "Someone has to clear the stairs, but it doesn't have to be you. If you can do only one thing to save those people, then perhaps someone else can handle the stairs, so you can do something else, something far more important."

"Like what?"

"Lead them out. Show them the way. If the reason you are there is to save those people, then the single most important thing you can do is lead them out, to help them to reach the decontamination tent behind us. Do you see that?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Then tell Ted Bartok to take over for you right now, and start leading the people waiting there down the stairs."

"But what about the yellow drops?"

"The decontamination people will scrape it off when they get down here. So will you do it?"

"Okay." She handed the mike back to the fire chief.

* * *

"Okay... cut," Amy Gratham told her cameraman. "That long lens is really a lifesaver. Now we need to get your video edited up with the audio we're taping off the police monitor in the truck."

After handing down the camera and climbing off the roof, he joined her inside the news van. "Is it going to work?"

"I certainly hope so. Ever since last week's incident outside the hospital, I've been hoping to get some follow-up on Congresswoman Haekson. This is the first time she's been in public since she holed up with Fox. Evan might have wanted us to get some dirt on the two of them, but this human-interest angle will get us a heck of a lot more notice."

"In any case, the video's worthless without the radio chatter. Let's get it dubbed."

Chapter Twenty-FOUR

Derek looked nervously through his reflection in the living room window at the traffic snarling the street below his apartment building, while waiting for Melissa to pick up her phone. The afternoon still haunted him, replaying endlessly in his mind.

A few minutes after Lillian Haekson had returned the mike, Rayburn's main door swung open and Captain Mercer stepped out, followed by a single-file line of worried congressional staffers, their eyes and faces red from irritation caused by the toxin. Two people wearing protective clothing with Homeland Security emblems directed them across the street to the field

decontamination unit set up on the Capitol grounds.

A short while later, two gauze-masked EMTs carried Arthur Fox out on a stretcher. Since Dr. Morales had joined her co-workers, Derek had had to restrain Melissa from running towards him. The EMTs stopped in the middle of the street and waited for a decontamination worker to join them. Once Fox had been transferred to a wheeled carrier, they folded up the stretcher and re-entered the building.

The two waited for word about her father while watching the line of office workers emerge in groups of about a dozen and be escorted to the decontamination unit. When the first of them were released into the cold DC air, they were wearing ill-fitting white coveralls and what looked like paper sandals. Melissa clutched the change of clothes that Dr. Morales had told her to bring for him, and leaned against Derek.

"Yeah, hi. It's me," he said, exhaling weakly. "How's he doing?"

"A lot better, now."

He didn't speak for a moment, time that was filled by the murmur of people talking in the background, and the echo of a doctor being paged on the PA system. "Do they know why he passed out?"

Due to the large number of people being treated for the effects of the toxin, the hospital had restricted those waiting to only one family member or close friend per patient. After making sure that she had her phone, Derek had gone home.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

"The doctor told me that bleeding from the eyes like that ought to have only happened if he'd had a much stronger exposure to the stuff."

"So why did it happen?"

She was quiet again.

"Melissa?"

The doorbell rang. It was Rodney Falk. Derek mouthed her name and closed the door. Rodney nodded, and stood watching him.

"Well," she said softly, "it seems he was keeping a secret from me."

"A secret?"

"Yeah. Remember the 10K run for the Northern Virginia Neurological Institute?"

"Sure. He's been helping them get sponsors. Why?"

"There was a reason for that. He was also a patient there."

Derek turned away from Rodney. "A patient? For what?"

Another silence. "MS. I just found out that he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis a few years ago. They've been treating him. Some new experimental drug."

"I don't get it. What does that have to do with how he was affected by the toxin?"

"According to the sheet they handed me when we got here, this T2 stuff breaks down cell walls. In a bad exposure, it destroys bone marrow. That'll kill you. Short of that, it messes up the blood cells and breaks down all sorts of membranes. That's what the bleeding's about. Anyway, the drug he's been getting also affects cell walls. So the combination of the two made it worse."

He shook his head. "Ouch. So what did they do?"

"They filtered the MS drug from his blood and gave him some fresh as well. Unfortunately, the T2 also screwed up the treatment he's been getting, so he may not be able to go back on it."

"Have you told your Aunt Lilly?"

She sighed. "I didn't have to. She already knew."

"I guess your dad was really close to her. So how's she doing?"

"I don't know. We got separated during all the excitement."

The doorbell rang again. "Look, 'lissa, I've got some other things to deal with right now. Rodney and Gisela are here to discuss some trouble that Malcolm Jeffries has stirred up. I'll call you back when we're finished, okay?"

"Yeah. Hugs."

"Hugs."

When he opened the door for Gisela and saw the worried look on her face, Derek nodded and said, "I just spoke with her. He's doing better, but at a cost."

She looked a question at him while folding her scarf.

Once he'd hung up their coats, Derek joined them in the living room. "Yeah. It seems that his zeal to find corporate support for the Neurological Institute wasn't exactly altruistic. He's been a

patient of their for years, some kind of experimental MS drug. Anyway, the stuff he was exposed to this morning scotched his treatment."

"But he's going to be okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. He'll survive the toxin, but now that the cat's out of the bag, I'm sure the press are going to make a big deal about the whole thing."

She sighed in annoyance. "They are so predictable. You'd think at least one of them would realize that as long as the press persists in this reactive mode, they'll never really serve the public interest. I mean, all they ever do is grab onto bits of accidental revelation and play them up into something to trick the public into buying into their twisted idea of what 'news' means. Even their so-called investigative journalists play that game. Now, if I ran a news organization, we'd be more interested in the less obvious aspects of what's going on, we'd tell the world about the real reasons behind it."

"Had a bad day?" Rodney asked lightly.

"The worst. I was chatting with a customer while looking through the knowledge base for some insights about a driver conflict on his PC, when news of the incident hit the air. Have you heard what they're calling it?"

"Not really," Derek admitted.

"Let me guess," Rodney said. "'The Beltway BioTerror?'"

"Better. Would you believe, 'The Election Day Toxin Terror'? Sure the polls are open, but the attack didn't have anything to do with voting. Now, I could see going with something like that if they'd sprayed the stuff into polling places, but not for a congressional office building. It's ludicrous."

"So what happened?"

"The bane of call center banter. Somehow, I ended up in a shouting match with my customer over it. I'm not really sure how it got started. Probably some inane remark about the incident, something intended as humor that didn't go over too well."

Derek smiled. "Yours...? Or his?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, yeah. After that harangue about the press being so reactive, I was wondering if you were just being overly defensive about something you'd said to incite the argument."

She frowned, nodding. "Yeah. It was me."

"Come on, Gisela," Rodney chided, "so you had an argument with your customer. So what? How could that have ruined your day?"

"It didn't," she said darkly. "It just started it off, that's all."

"There was more, then?" Derek prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Lots. When I got off the phone, I found my lead standing over me, fuming. It seems my agitation was catching. Everyone was getting irritable with their customers, and it wasn't making our manager very happy. She blocked the queue and sent the lot of us home early, not the happiest of outcomes for a bunch of hourly wage-slaves. I'm not so sure I still have a job."

"Maybe not, but you can still have pizza. The usual?"

"Sure."

One of the reasons that Derek liked his webphone so much was its ability to play a canned sequence of commands, in this case placing an order for a fully loaded deep dish special. With that out of the way, he put the unit down and gazed out the window.

"So... how do you think they did it?" Rodney asked.

"The air system, I guess," Derek said offhandedly.

"No, I mean how did they organize the attack? Congressional buildings must have some pretty pricey security systems, after all. Did they have inside help? And who did the deed, for that matter?"

"Or more importantly," Gisela said, "why? What's so important about the Rayburn building, and why today?"

"Look, both of you," Derek said wearily, "I've had just about enough about that already. Could we move on the reason I asked you two over here? Please?"

"Jeffries."

"Yeah."

Rodney sat forward and turned towards Derek. "You said there was some kind of situation?"

"I got a call from Barry about him yesterday. It seems he's behind the rash of public Burnout Fever accusations that have been dogging public figures around the world. One of his people was

harassing Melissa's Aunt Lilly when she went BF in the middle of a committee meeting up on the hill, and then disrupted a news crew waiting to speak with her when she left the hospital."

"What? Did he get tired of complaining about GMOs or something?"

"Something."

"So... Derek," Gisela said, "what do you figure he's up to? What's his game?"

He shrugged. "Well, unless he's had some kind of moral conversion, he's probably still in it for the power. I guess he didn't get enough press from the GMO gig, and found an easier mark. Unfortunately, he's had plenty of practice from fighting PanAgra to perfect his sales pitch, and from what I read on the BF newsgroup thread that Barry started about him, he's managed to recruit quite a nasty little army."

Rodney gnawed his knuckle in thought. "As an organizer, he's one of the best. Unfortunately, his love for sucking people into that role-playing excuse for an activist community only manages to build an army of zombies."

"Yeah," Derek agreed. "That's what I'm afraid of. At some point, that distributed mob of his will get dense enough for them to start working in teams. The thought of Malcolm Jeffries driving a worldwide network of willing dupes into a frenzy of vacuous accusations is enough to give me nightmares. We've got to stop him somehow, but like I told Barry, not with force. Even though he posted a warning on the newsgroup about it, a couple of incidents that Jeffries' people stirred up put some people in the hospital, and others waiting for a court date."

"Okay." Gisela rose and drifted towards the window. "It seems to me that Jeffries is playing a very simple game. He's crafted scenarios and enlisted people to play them out. He's got to be using a web site to attract players, and probably uses chat or email to coordinate the whole thing. But no matter how good your script is, the moment your mark forces you to abandon it, you're on your own. That's probably why things go south when they're met with force. It's not in the script."

"I'll buy that," Rodney said. "So how do you counter it?"

"Well..." She stared out the window for a moment. "Maybe there's a way to use their scripts against them."

"Oh?" Derek checked his watch.

"Yeah. We know that Jeffries' people are a self-selected set of people with some common traits. They have a need to act out, but they haven't joined any of the more conventional activist groups, so I'm guessing that they want to appear to be acting on their own. At the same time, they're not confident enough to go out on their own, which is why they are willing to follow one of his scripts. It's an easy out. They get to satisfy their need to engage without actually having to."

"Where does that get you?"

"Here's the trick. Say you've encountered one of Jeffries' people in the midst of stirring up trouble. As far as he knows, he's working alone, and as long as he maintains the offensive, he doesn't have to worry about straying from the script. That's your in. Follow his lead for a while; make him think that you're both on the same team. He'll relax just enough for you to derail him. Watch him carefully, and wait for his body language to give him away. As soon as that happens, you make your move."

Rodney gazed at her. "And that is...?"

She smiled. "Make him think his script is out of date, that it was changed after he'd read it, and that there were specific instructions not to continue using the old one. By this time, you've got the gist of his play, so what you do is take some minor point that he's already made, and change it on him. In other words, you don't confront him, don't try to shout him down, or even try to stop him. Instead, you get him sidetracked into arguing over the script itself, rather than about what the script has him attacking. It's a context shift."

Before either Rodney or Derek had a chance to reply, there was a knock at the door. They glanced at one another and said, "Pizza!"

Once the delivery guy had gone, Derek put the opened box on the coffee table, sat down, and gazed blankly at it. Even after two pieces had been removed, he still didn't budge. While Gisela watched curiously, Rodney waved a hand in his face. "You okay buddy? Pizza's getting cold, you know."

He sat back and rattled his head. "Yeah. Okay. I was just thinking about something I saw earlier. The pie reminded me of it."

"Oh?" Gisela said between bites.

"Uh huh. The fountain in Bartholdi Park."

Rodney grimaced. "Hold it. The pizza reminded you of a fountain? What kind of drugs are

you on, anyway?"

He picked up a slice and took a bite. "I'm serious. Have you ever been there? Do you know the fountain I'm talking about?"

"Sure. The one with the ring of what used to be gas lights around the middle. What? Do you figure the three chicks are holding up a Deep Dish Special or something?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Something like that."

"And I suppose this is important for some reason?"

"I just wish I knew why, that's all. It's been bugging me for a while now. I've been going down there at lunchtime when I'm in the area and talking to it over my sandwich."

"Man, you've got to get out more. Does Melissa know you've got some kind of thing going with a statue?"

"Not the statue, you twit, the sculptor. I know he must have meant something with it. After all, the guy was a Mason."

Gisela, who had been quietly following the exchange, leaned forward a bit. "You know, he may actually be onto something. Masons were big on symbolism and metaphor, after all. He might not even have been aware of the meaning that Derek senses. It's not much different from any other act of creation. Writers are often accused of burying meaning into innocuous details, like the flap about the HAL-9000 computer in '2001: A Space Odyssey' being one letter off from IBM."

Rodney shook his head. "Okay. Whatever. Look, you called us here to talk about Malcolm Jeffries. Could we get back to that? Bullshitting about how a fountain is like a pizza isn't going to help us deal with his mess."

"Which reminds me," she said, "you two haven't told me what you think of my plan for sabotaging the guy's minions. What's your take on it?"

"Well," Derek said, "it sounds like it'd work if you were really familiar with their playbook, but it still seems awfully subtle to me. Not everyone will be able to pull it off. Got any other ideas?"

"Not really."

"Oh, come on Gisela. After crafting a conflict exploration process good enough to be selected for the National Activist Conference, I can't believe you're stumped."

"Now you just wait a minute! Just because you don't believe my solution will work does not mean that I'm stumped! I'm—"

She closed her eyes and took a breath as the force of her outrage was suddenly shattered by the sound of Bob Dylan's signature tune on Derek's cell phone. It wasn't Dylan, and the lyrics to 'The Times, they are a'Changin' might have been solely in her head, but her reaction was palpable just the same.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the display. It wasn't a voice call, but an automated page. He scooped up the remote control, switched on the TV, and switched to DC First News.

"What was that?" Rodney asked.

"There's news about Melissa's dad. I set up a filtered page request earlier at their website." He grabbed another slice of pizza and sat back to watch.

Amy Gratham was on screen, standing near the entrance to the field decontamination unit across from the Rayburn building, and looking a bit worn out.

"...and that besides Congressman Fox," she said gravely, "twenty-four other members of the House will also require more extensive treatment for exposure to the mycotoxin. Because the others had not succumbed as quickly as Fox had, they followed the instructions they had been given and put on their filter masks. Based on what we've been told by the emergency services people, the masks appear to have intensified the effects of the toxin."

"Gee. What a stroke of luck," Rodney said darkly.

"Homeland Security officials have begun an investigation into the failure of this equipment, and have scheduled a press conference tomorrow at noon to report on their initial findings."

"I can't wait to see how they spin this one," Gisela breathed.

Derek wiped his hands and folded his arms tightly.

"In the midst of all this chaos," Gratham continued, "there were numerous acts of heroism, but not all of them were performed by the dedicated EMTs who treated and evacuated the people inside despite being having been exposed to the

toxin themselves. DC First News was fortunate to have captured the following incident.”

When the inset video image of Melissa’s Aunt Lilly holding a microphone appeared beside the reporter, Derek leaned forward and stared.

“One of the EMTs had begun acting oddly, and another had radioed for assistance. We caught the exchange on our police scanner and matched it to the video. Listen.”

“Captain Mercer?” The audio crackled, and wasn’t perfectly synched to the video. “This is Lillian Haekson. You don’t know me, but I know what you’re going through, and I think I can help. Let me tell you a story. Can you hear me?”

While the incident played out, Gratham made occasional comments to clarify what was happening. Rodney and Gisela watched raptly. When the inset disappeared, she again faced the camera.

“Regardless of whether her affliction with Burnout Fever is simply a new disease or, as Reverend McQuarry claims, a divine sentence of damnation, Congresswoman Lillian Haekson is a hero, one of those responsible for helping the people in the Rayburn House Office Building to reach safety today. Those spreading the idea that people with Burnout Fever have been forcibly removed, by God, from any form of leadership role, will now have to reckon with the actions of one very determined damned soul, a woman whose ability to lead has been demonstrated so ably this afternoon. This is Amy Gratham, for DC First News.”

The image shrunk to an inset beside the studio anchor. “Thanks, Amy,” he said, and then the inset was replaced by a stock image of Haekson at some press conference. “We’ll be seeing more of the Congresswoman from Spokane tomorrow. She’s been requested to testify at a special Senate hearing about the effects of Burnout Fever on the ability of the government to operate. As you may recall, Haekson contracted the disease on October 28th, and has been on medical leave since being released from the hospital. Two of the scheduled witnesses were congress members whose staffers had contracted the disease. But because they have now been exposed to the toxin, they will not be available until they have recovered.”

“Getting back to the election results—”

Derek turned the TV off. “We’ll, that’s pretty weird.”

Rodney scooped up their garbage, dropped it into the now-empty pizza box and closed the lid. “What is?”

He shook his head in amusement. “It seems I’m going to be testifying with Congresswoman Haekson at that hearing tomorrow.”

“You’re what?” Gisela said incredulously.

“The whole reason I went to Capitol Hill today was to speak with Melissa’s dad about my testimony. We were supposed to have lunch. I was going to tell you all about it the other day, but I guess it slipped my mind.”

Rodney got his back up. “Yeah, sure. Why remember something like that?”

“Look, it wasn’t supposed to be anything special. Those hearings have endless witnesses, and I was scheduled for the final panel. In other words, I might not even get called, depending on how the rest of the hearing went.”

“Oh, well, in that case, you might as well not even bother showing up.”

Derek laughed. “Knock it off, Rodney. All they want to know was how groups like ours deal with losses to Burnout Fever. They could’ve called just about anyone to answer that question.”

“Oh, sure,” Rodney retorted, “anyone but Malcolm Jeffries.”

“Maybe so,” Gisela said offhandedly, “but they picked you. Who knows, if there’s anything to McQuarry’s theory, you might turn out to be the heir to some part in the cosmic screenplay, maybe even the lead.”

Derek winced, and then broke out into relieved laughter. “All right, both of you. Out!”

Chapter Twenty-FIVE

"Then I don't understand," Haekson said as they reached the curb. "How can you control an outbreak if there's no way to predict what it's going to do next?"

Dr. Morales stopped for a moment to think. Explaining things to Lillian had become almost a game, a test of her ingenuity in couching whatever they were discussing within the context that the congresswoman had been relegated to by Burnout Fever. On their way to the Dirksen Senate Office Building for today's hearing, they'd passed the time talking about Elena's work at the Centers for Disease Control. It was mostly small talk, but from time to time it had led into some of the details of how the CDC operated. This was a mixed blessing, as far as she was concerned, because although Lillian found the procedures fascinating, some aspects of them fit into her newly constrained worldview about as well as a giant squid fit into a lollipop mold.

She resumed walking. "I suppose you could think of it like the course of a discussion in one of your meetings."

Haekson frowned briefly.

Morales knew that switching contexts was difficult for anyone suffering from Burnout Fever, but from the time she'd spent with Lillian, she'd discovered that bringing a foreign concept into the parliamentary context that she'd become fixated on made it possible for her to deal with it. The conversion wasn't always easy, though.

"I think you're going to have to give me some more to go on, Elena."

"Okay," she said, glancing at a passing tourist's college parka. "Say you're at a hearing, and one of the witnesses — Leslie Omak, my research associate at the University of Washington — describes the Burnout Fever research being done at yew-dub. You ask how the research is funded, and her answer sets off a whole side discussion about the effects of corporate involvement on the validity of scientific studies."

They'd reached the corner across from the Dirksen building by this point, so Morales waited patiently while Lillian worked through the scenario and attempted to relate it to what they'd been talking about.

"All right," she said unsteadily, "so how does that help?"

Morales smiled. "In your meeting, there has just been an outbreak of a yew-dub meme. Patient zero, the one who started it, was your witness. She transmitted the meme to you, and then you spread it to the rest of the committee."

The light changed, and they started across the street.

"In that case," Haekson said, her confidence growing, "then the spread of this yew-dub meme would proceed by cliques, wouldn't it?"

"Pretty much, yes. In fact—"

"So I was right," a man in a hooded coat called from the corner they were approaching.

Morales watched him warily as they reached the curb, assessing the intent of his blocked body language: crossed arms and a slightly spread stance.

"The CDC is in league with the Devil!"

She sighed, and tried to walk past him, but then matched his body language when he stepped in front of her and she recognized him. "You really don't give up, do you, Mr. Szendal?"

Haekson stared at him blankly. "You know this man?"

"Boy," he said in amusement, "when God takes someone out of her role, he doesn't kid around."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Damnation Fever," he said, amused at her reference. "I saw you get it, so don't try to mess with my head."

"It's Burnout Fever, you moron," Morales said derisively. "Now get out of our way."

"Not a chance. I've been waiting for Congresswoman Haekson to show up for this hearing."

"Look, if you want to watch, get yourself a seat in the gallery. But I doubt the Senators will be as forgiving of outbursts as—"

He shook his head. "I don't care about them. It's her I'm interested in."

Haekson stood her ground. "Why? What have I ever done to you? Are you even from my district?"

"District? What you've done is more damaging than some petty political squabble from Spokane. I mean, the idea of trying to prevent God from carrying out the destruction of—"

"God?" Morales said in disbelief. "What's gotten into you anyway?"

"Oh, no. You're not going to get rid of me so easily this time. I've done my research. I know what she's been proposing."

Haekson closed her eyes briefly before speaking. "Fine. If you want to talk, we'll talk." Her tone was calm, controlled. "But you're going to have to keep a civil tongue, or I'll clear the sidewalk."

Morales stifled a grin when she realized that her friend had just turned their curbside debate into a formal meeting.

"Now then, who are you?"

Suddenly placed on the defensive, he backed up a half step. "I told you already. Viktor Szendal." Then, recognizing his sudden loss of control, he shook his head. "Now wait a minute. What are you doing?"

"My job." Her commanding tone was enough to cause several passers-by to stop and gawk. One of them pointed at her and whispered to his neighbor.

"Okay, Viktor," Morales said, playing into Haekson's context. "You've accused us each of something, now. What do you have to back it up?"

He bit his lip, frowning uncomfortably at the odd turn of events. "Simply this: Congresswoman Haekson's pet cause is sacrilege."

Morales turned her head. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Come on, Congresswoman, I'm sure you've heard this before." Szendal warmed to the attack. "Agitating to dismantle the volcano on La Palma — trying to keep God from devastating this entire coast with a watery fist when he smashes it into the sea — that's not exactly in the Great Script, you know! This country deserves—"

The growing crowd was beginning to block foot traffic.

"To live." Haekson said stolidly. "Heading off a natural disaster is hardly against God's will, not that you're likely to know what that is anyway."

"I don't have to," Szendal retorted angrily. "You've been struck down by God with Damnation Fever because you challenged his will. That's all I need to know."

Morales glanced at her. "And I suppose that she's been removed from any kind of leadership role as a result?"

"You bet!" He smiled confidently. "Nobody with Damnation Fever can lead. It's God's will."

A murmur swept through the crowd. Someone called out, "Oh yeah? Then how come she saved all those people yesterday? Tell me that, wise guy!"

Haekson raised her hands to the crowd. "I'll have order in this meeting!"

"She has a point, Mr. Szendal," Morales said.

He looked around uncomfortably. "It was a fluke! An accident!"

"And I suppose she isn't in control of this crowd right now?"

For a moment, it seemed as if he was going to say something, but then he pushed through the crowd and fled, a flurry of taunts dogging his retreat.

Haekson looked around at the people gathered to watch. "Do I hear a motion to adjourn?"

Several people responded.

"So ordered." She looked earnestly at Morales. "Now can we get to this hearing?"

Chapter Twenty-SIX

Even from behind the unruly crowd waiting for their turn at the hospital information desk, Derek had no trouble watching as the clerk slowly unwrapped yet another DuraBar and took a bite. In the half-hour he'd been waiting, she'd gone through three of them, and judging from the weary look on her face and the pile of wrappers on the counter, time-release caffeine may have been the only thing keeping her awake.

He glanced at his watch and frowned. Since he wasn't scheduled to testify at the Senate hearing until late in the afternoon, he'd decided to swing by the hospital to see how Congressman Fox was doing, and to visit with Melissa for a while. Unfortunately, the short side-trip looked like

it was going to take the better part of the day.

Resigned to the tedium of waiting, he turned to look around the crowded lobby, and hoped that the rest of the facility wasn't as filthy. The normally pristine glass overlooking the front parking area was grimy with child-sized fingerprints and smeared with what looked like the remains of snacks they'd eaten. The two refuse cans flanking the entrance were stuffed to overflowing with take-out bags from a variety of nearby drive-throughs, and a trail of crushed paper cups and dirty napkins snaked across the floor. Most of the people were clustered around the chairs and couches on the far side of the room. Some were reading or chatting, but a strong majority appeared to have tuned out the world by focusing on whatever was on the TV at the moment.

After a nudge from the annoyed man behind him in what passed for a line, he stepped a bit closer to the counter. Three more people to go; there was still a chance he might get in before he had to leave. When he turned to see how far the line behind him stretched, he found a delivery being wheeled through the door: three big boxes of DuraBars on a hand truck being guided by a middle-aged man wearing a business suit. When the receptionist saw him, she stood up and waved him over, then handed him a pass and pointed towards the elevator.

Derek was busy watching the delivery being eased into the elevator when the commotion behind him suddenly stopped. A moment later, a restrained voice said, "Okay, they're ready now. Here's the spokesman from Homeland Security."

The scene shifted to a podium flanked by flags and backed by a dark curtain. A large man in an unfamiliar uniform stepped to the microphone. "We have some additional information to release regarding yesterday's bioterror attack on the Rayburn House Office Building. Intelligence has confirmed the identity of the man in a video transmitted via the Internet to the Pentagon earlier today. According to the video statement, the attack was conducted in response to the United States' reluctance to do anything to reduce the effects of global climate change. It was carried out under the guidance of a paramilitary organization based on what are claimed to be extra-national islands in the western Pacific Ocean. Their contention that those islands have become submerged by the rise in sea level caused by the burning of fossil fuels has not been validated, precisely because the alleged islands had not been mapped."

"As to the toxin itself, the CDC has reported that it is a genetically altered form of tricothecene mycotoxin, more commonly known as T2. In other words, the fungus used to produce the poison had been engineered for the purpose, and that will help us to track down where, when, and by whom it was developed. The only labs known to have been working with this toxin are under contract with the UN's Drug Crop Eradication Program, which is part of the World Health Organization. The Department of Homeland Security has begun an investigation of affiliated corporations operating in this country, and the State Department is negotiating with other nations in order to pursue the investigation overseas."

Even before the announcement had ended, the tone in the lobby changed. Where before there were dozens of different conversations, now it seemed they were all just variations on the same one. Everyone in the crowd was, at least for the moment, on the same page of some non-existent script. Then, one by one, the various discussions began to veer off into other directions. The same words and phrases stopped bouncing across the room, and chaos reasserted itself.

"Sir?" The voice came from behind him.

When Derek looked around, he found that nobody was standing closer to the counter than he was. He was next.

The receptionist crumbled her empty chocolate wrapper and tossed it on the pile. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yeah. I'd like to visit Congressman Arthur Fox. He's here recovering from yesterday's—"

"I know." She nodded, and typed briefly. "According to the database, his daughter is visiting, though. There's a limit of how many—"

"Then can I speak with her?"

"Sure." She punched a few buttons and handed him the receiver.

He listened for a while before handing it back. "No answer."

She glanced up at him. "Hold on a minute. Let me check something." Soon, she nodded and smiled. "Looks like he's been taken to Hematology for a transfusion."

"A trans—? But I thought they gave him plasma yesterday. Who's the donor?"

She shrugged. "How should I know? Some close relative, I suppose."

"His daughter. Remember I asked to speak with his daughter? I'll bet she's the donor. Can you tell from here?"

"In a minute." When she finished unwrapping another DuraBar and had taken a big bite of it, she did another search. "Yup. There it is. Melissa Fox was logged as a patient. You can go in." She handed him a visitor badge. "Seventh floor. Follow the signs."

"Thanks."

Derek's elation at finally getting inside the hospital lasted only until the doors of the elevator slid shut. It reeked. He winced at the mixture of vomit, ammonia and what he suspected was the stench of heat-damaged medications. The hospital staffer beside him seemed not to even notice, which probably meant that it had been like this for some time.

The seventh floor wasn't much of an improvement, either. Two interns were berating a nurse as the door slid open, and the PA system was emitting a piercing wail of feedback. When the screech subsided, it was replaced by an unintelligible announcement. The Nurse's station across from the elevator looked like something out of a war zone, an effect reinforced by the chaotic gathering of hospital staff gathered around the cluttered counters. Several beepers supplied an erratic soundtrack to the scene, all of which were being studiously ignored by members of the crowd while a bleary-eyed man in a business suit barked orders at them.

Derek looked around for a sign, and then hurried down the hallway towards the Hematology Lab. Along the way, he nearly lost his footing on a slippery oil slick surrounding the remains of two demolished carts. Pausing to catch his breath, he mused that if this place was still able to provide medical care, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Once he was past the patient rooms and into a stretch of corridor with only labs and other support facilities, things began to look a lot more normal. When he finally reached Hematology, he turned to glance behind him before opening the door.

The calm man behind the desk smiled and indicated a nearby chair. "Take a rest first. You look like you could use one."

"Thanks. What's been going on around this place, anyway?"

"Burnout Fever. What else?"

Derek glanced nervously at the door. "You don't mean to tell me that the staff...?"

"No. We can't afford to put our patients at risk. If they get it, staffers still willing to work are swapped into support roles. Unfortunately, that means fewer qualified front-line specialists, so the doctors, nurses and interns that are left end up working extra shifts, and the ones relegated to cleaning bedpans and delivering food get so frustrated that they eventually quit. It's a pretty nasty business."

"And you?"

He smiled. "I lucked out, I guess."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "I used to run triage in the emergency room. So how can I help you?"

"When did you get it?"

"Get what?"

Derek took a breath and composed himself. "When did you get Burnout Fever?"

"Pretty early on, from what they've told me. That's why I ended up with one of the office jobs instead of some sort of floor duty. When I reported back to work, and discovered that I couldn't deal with it any more, they figured they could lose a contractor in order to keep me around."

Derek stood and approached the desk. "I understand that Congressman Fox is having a transfusion in here somewhere."

"Oh, sure. He's in number three. Want to see him?"

"Is his daughter with him? Melissa Fox?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She's the donor. Go on in. It's the second door on the right."

"Thanks." Derek checked his watch again before opening the door. The Senate hearing would have gotten underway by now. If he wanted to catch any of Melissa's Aunt Lilly's testimony, they wouldn't have much time to chat.

Chapter Twenty-SEVEN

"I'm sorry, Governor Rice," the junior senator at the far left end of the dais said while raising a neatly bound sheaf of paper, "but my copy of your supporting material packet seems to be incomplete."

The governor of Illinois quickly thumbed through his own copy. "It looks like this one is okay. Would you like to borrow it, Senator Maslow?"

Before Maslow had a chance to answer, three of the other seven members on the Senate Government Management Oversight Subcommittee that were present had found similar problems, and were conferring with their respective aides.

"It appears that they're all bad," the subcommittee chairman said in annoyance.

Two staffers converged on the chairman from opposite ends of the dais, and the three engaged in a subdued, though evidently heated exchange. While they talked, the remaining members watched impatiently. When their impromptu conference finally broke up, one of the staffers borrowed Rice's copy and left the room, while the other stepped into a corner and pulled out her cell phone.

Chairman Kolya gaveled the room back to order. "Unfortunately," he said solemnly, "the support staff in the Dirksen Building has once again been bested by the problem that we're here today to discuss, so I guess it can serve as a case in point. A lot of the business of government is simply making sure that things run smoothly." He nodded at the witness. "We appreciate your having gone to the trouble of preparing that material for us, Governor, but it appears that we'll have to proceed without it, at least for now." Turning towards the staffer standing in the corner, he added, "It might be a good idea to check the copies of materials provided by our other witnesses again, so you'll have a chance to fix any problems before they offer their testimony." He sat back in his seat again. "You were saying, Governor Rice?"

Rice took a long breath, and scanned the sparsely populated dais. "Missing some pages of a report is one thing, senators. Losing emergency services workers and other critical specialists to Burnout Fever is quite another. For the State of Illinois, this came to a head last week, when the Mayor of Chicago ordered Midway Airport to be shut down." He paused to sip some water. "With as many air traffic controllers as we've lost both at Midway and at O'Hare, there was no way we could permit the FAA to continue operating both fields. The risk to the people of the Chicago metropolitan area was far too great. I'm sure you all saw the press conferences that arose from that dispute, but one thing that may not have been obvious is that the conflict was really between different levels of government: the Federal Aviation Administration versus the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago."

"Pardon me, Governor," Senator Maslow said, "but as I understood it, the controllers were supposed to have been using some sort of a buddy system to cover for their staff losses. The FAA assured us that it would solve the problem."

He shook his head. "It did at first, Senator, but you can only stretch your staff so far. Beyond a certain point, all that strategy does is keep the controllers that are left from concentrating on their own problems. Midway Field management wanted to keep pushing their staff, but the controllers refused to cooperate. The FAA attempted to force the issue, but fortunately, the City of Chicago was willing to take action to protect itself, and the state agreed."

"Well," Maslow said, "I can certainly see the rationale for protecting the people, but how did this move affect all of the people and businesses dependent on Midway being in operation? What did the airlines do, for instance?"

He crossed his arms. "I think you're getting the idea, Senator. Everything in our economy is so interconnected that losing any piece of it is going to have far-reaching effects. Closing Midway caused the airlines that used it to have to re-organize all of their flights, and to negotiate with O'Hare for gate access. All of the ticketing services were thrown into chaos as well. But because O'Hare was already fully booked, they had to ask other airlines to pull flights from their own schedules, and that in turn affected every single other airport and airline in the country, not to mention those with international connections. And yet, even with all that going on, even with the economies of dozens of states in the wringer, none of the governors I've spoken with could get any kind of emergency relief from the federal government."

By the time he'd stopped to stare angrily at the senators, chatter from the gallery had become loud enough to drown out the subcommittee staffer's cell phone. Chairman Kolya called for quiet, but had trouble even being heard over the din. When the room finally settled down, he said,

“Okay. I think we understand how much trouble the airline industry is in. How are state and local governments handling the crisis?”

Governor Rice closed his eyes for a moment. “It’s not just governments, Senator. We all rely on private contractors to provide essential services. They’re having just as much trouble as this committee, if not more. And that’s affected our ability to keep the roads repaired, and now that it’s winter, from keeping them plowed as well. Cities are operating with too few police, fire and other emergency workers, which means that our citizens are at heightened risk, which in turn has induced many of them to take extreme actions to compensate. Sometimes, that means acquiring illegal weapons to protect their families.”

He took another sip of water while the effects of his words sunk in. “We’re dealing with a crisis unlike anything we’ve experienced before, and if there are any other terrorist attacks like the one at the Rayburn Building yesterday morning, I don’t think we’ll be in any position to deal with it.”

Maslow thought briefly. “I understand your concern, Governor Rice, but air safety is not our only concern here...”

He fielded a series of questions from various members of the subcommittee, but none of them seemed to lead anywhere. Most were inquiries about the details he’d provided in his packet, and requests for more insight regarding the ways in which various agencies and companies were dealing with staff losses.

Finally, Chairman Kolya regained the floor. “We’d like to thank you for speaking with us, Governor Rice. Unfortunately, the only federal resources available to help out are restricted by statute. Even if you were to declare some portion of your state as a disaster area, we’d be powerless to help you. Since the problems exist everywhere, there’s no rationale for choosing which areas to help, and which to ignore.”

Rice ground his jaw, his right fist tightening in frustration. “I really wasn’t expecting to get anywhere with this meeting, Senator, and you’ve confirmed my suspicions. When I meet with the other midwestern governors this evening, we’ll discuss alternatives. You should be aware, however, that just like our citizens, we might be forced to take extreme measures.” He glared at the chairman. “Senators, this is a matter of survival.”

When three members of the committee began speaking at once, Lillian Haekson, who sat with Dr. Morales just beyond the witness tables, struck her palms loudly. “I’ll have order in this meeting!”

In the shocked silence that followed, the loudest of the three, Ned Fortaigh, the senior senator from Tennessee, took the floor by force. “Now see here, Governor Rice,” he repeated. “That sounds an awful lot like a threat to me. What exactly are you suggesting here?”

Rice fumed. “I’m not ‘suggesting’ anything, Senator. Every time Congress issues another unfunded mandate, state and local governments are expected to pick up the tab. As long as it doesn’t come out of the federal budget, you people don’t seem to think anything of running up expenses for someone else. Well, that can only go on for so long. There comes a time when the states have to say ‘No!’ The balance of power has shifted so far towards the federal government that the states have become its slaves. So now, when the entire country — the entire world — is in crisis, when every aspect of the economy is threatened by the loss of qualified workers to this scourge, you sit back and tell us that there’s nothing that you can do to help. Well, that’s just not going to work. You may think yourselves above helping the people of this country, but we’re down there with them. Governors are directly responsible for the wellbeing of our citizens, and we’re not about to let them get hung out to dry. If the federal government refuses to come to the aid of the states, then the states may just have to do without it. If you’ve forgotten, this country was founded as the union of the several states. They existed before the constitution, and they’ll be around afterwards as well.”

Chairman Kolya swallowed hard, and said, “This meeting is in recess.”

While the senators flipped off their mikes and spoke nervously among themselves, Governor Rice looked around the room in horror. Fomenting revolution wasn’t exactly the safest thing to be doing in a nation prone to bouts of patriotic fervor based on hypothetical threats from non-specific enemies. He gathered up his papers and hastily left the room.

After the door swung shut behind him, Haekson looked around. “I don’t understand. What was that about?”

Dr. Morales shut her eyes and took a breath. “It’s too long to go into right now. Remind me again later.”

When the senators were finished conferring, Chairman Kolya reconvened the meeting and welcomed the second panel of witnesses. “We’re fortunate to have with us today a member of the House who can shed some welcome light on what its like to have Burnout Fever. As you no doubt have heard, Congresswoman Lillian Haekson played a dramatic role in rescuing many of the people trapped in the Sam Rayburn House Office Building after yesterday morning’s terror attack. Joining her on the panel is Dr. Elena Morales, one of the CDC researchers dedicated to learning what causes the disease and how to treat those who have contracted it. Because they were asked to testify on such short notice, we have dispensed with the requirement that they submit written testimony prior to the meeting. Congresswoman Haekson and Dr. Morales, welcome to the committee. Which of you would like to speak first?”

Morales nodded. “Before we begin, congressman, I’d like to explain something about Burnout Fever.”

“Proceed.”

“When a person gets this disease, they typically become locked into whatever context they were involved in at the time. Because Congresswoman Haekson was running a meeting, she sees the world from the perspective of structures and processes. That was why she reacted so strongly to the disruption earlier. This does not mean that she can only understand such things, only that it is her primary method, and that it is difficult for her to translate things expressed through other contexts. Consequently, it may be necessary for me to translate your questions or her answers.”

“I see. Well, in that case, I’d like to begin with Congresswoman Haekson.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Senator. What would you like to know?”

He thought briefly. “Mostly, I’d like to understand what its like — having Burnout Fever, that is. How well do you recall the incident, for example?”

“The incident, sir?”

Morales leaned towards her microphone. “It helps to be specific, rather than referring to something said earlier.”

“Thank you, Dr. Morales.” He looked again at Haekson. “Tell us what happened at the meeting when you got Burnout Fever, if you would. We’re curious about how it changes you.”

During the few moments that it took her to reply, a few of the senators squirmed uncomfortably in their seats, and one began drumming his fingers on the table.

“Please bear with me,” she said at last. “There was quite a bit of confusion in the meeting room, and it’s difficult for me to unravel what is now just a jumble of memories. My committee was discussing a request from the CDC for the funding needed to augment what the various Burnout Fever research teams had raised independently. Dr. Morales had briefed us on how the effort was proceeding, and her associate — Harvey Wood — spoke about funding and logistics issues. I had just asked Mr. Wood whether the CDC had considered issuing instructions to the public about the disease, when we were interrupted by someone in the gallery.”

She glanced at Morales before proceeding. “I just told you what was going on, but for the life of me I wouldn’t be able to explain half of the details I remember. I might be able to recite the dialog, if my memory was that good, but when the discussion touches on other topics, I just draw a blank. Dr. Morales told me that it has something to do with the Limbic System, and how it assigns interconnected meaning to things, but all I know is that I can’t follow sudden changes in a discussion, and I easily lose track of pronouns.

“Anyway, when I try to recall the moments before the change happened, it’s like having a crowd of unruly voices in my head, all chattering away. I know I must have been thinking about a lot of different things, but because of how my focus has changed, I can only remember one of them at a time. I’m not certain, but I get the feeling that in some way, I was able to keep all of those voices from talking at the same time — that somehow I was aware of when any of them was about to disrupt the meeting, and gavel my head back to order.” She frowned. “I’m sorry, did any of that make sense?”

When none of the senators replied, Morales pulled the mike towards her. “If I understand that correctly, she’s describing what’s commonly known as multi-tasking. The voices are the various trains of thought, and the meeting is the subject at hand.”

“Thank you, Dr. Morales. I’m beginning to see just how different the world seems to someone dealing with this thing. Please continue, Congresswoman Haekson.”

“Yes. Well, as I was saying, there was an interruption from the gallery, and I was just about to do something about it when the change started. One by one, those voices first became muffled, and then vanished. But it wasn’t just that.” She thought briefly. “In a way, the voices had formed a

kind of community, and when each one disappeared, the others reacted. It sounded like a scream of pain, and it was very uncomfortable. But when it was over, when all the screaming ended, there was just one voice left. I felt very calm, like I do after waking from a sound sleep. When I first described it to Dr. Morales, she said the calm feeling was what she seeks out while meditating, and that for her it takes some effort to achieve that state. For me, though, it was just... there."

Kolya glanced nervously at his colleagues. "And that's how things are for you right now?" "Yes."

Morales activated her mike. "If you followed that, Senator, then you'll begin to understand why people with Burnout Fever find it so difficult to change context. Think of the voices she spoke of as the different ways that whatever you're discussing relates to the world. Where your subconscious might get a sense of where they're all going by delegating the process to bits of your brain, and then characterizing the result of that parallel processing by generalizing, a person with Burnout Fever can no longer do that. They'd have to consciously select each of the possible implications in turn, and then examine it in isolation. Some people get lost and forget what they were originally thinking about."

"I see. Now what about the fixations I've heard about? Like that Seattle Air Traffic Controller who sat there admiring the lights on his screen. What's that?"

"Using Congresswoman Haekson's model, the one voice that's left is the one that was concerned with whatever the person had been doing at the time. For the air controller, that was watching his screen. The other voices in his head at that moment would have been concerned with such things as what kind of aircraft each blip represented, the paths they were tracing, and the patterns they were making in the airspace he was managing. Undoubtedly, there were even more voices, because we all have subtle concerns about ourselves, our friends and families, plans we may be making, and so on and so forth. But when the dust cleared, all he was left with was the one that told him to watch the screen."

"Then what was Congresswoman Haekson's voice? What was she left with?"

Dr. Morales smiled at her new friend. "She was doing what you are at the moment, managing a meeting. That's why she's so well attuned to structure and process, and why she was able to help that med tech yesterday."

Chairman Ayala sat back and glanced around the room. "Then in a way, I suppose Congresswoman Haekson was lucky."

"Indeed. In fact, she was a good deal luckier than most of the people who have gotten this disease. People have become trapped in all manner of contexts as a result of Burnout Fever, and few of them have been able to continue working in their chosen profession. Fortunately, there are fields in which narrowly defined tasks are the norm, which is why a lot of the patients we've been tracking have ended up in the fast food industry."

"Since this portion of the meeting is necessarily less formal than it might otherwise be," Ayala said, "I'm going to throw the floor open to questions from the committee."

Senator Maslow was the first to speak. "Since you mentioned the research effort, Dr. Morales, I was wondering if you could tell us how the field teams are being affected."

"As you might expect, Senator, we've had losses of our own. But unlike Air Traffic Controllers, who share a common skill set, our teams are comprised of an interlocking set of specialists. When we lose one, there's a hole in our ability to operate."

"So what do you do?"

"At first, we put out calls for volunteers, mostly via the Internet. That worked for a while, but it's become much more difficult to find suitable replacements for lost talent. There have been suggestions that we shut down some of the hardest-hit field teams and ask the remaining researchers to join other groups, but that would cause financial hardship for many of our best people. We also have the problem of being harassed, and in some cases our facilities have been vandalized by people opposed to what we are doing."

"Wouldn't that risk be reduced if you had fewer field teams?"

"It would. At the moment, we're working through the logistics of implementing the plan."

Another senator asked how the research was going, and what they'd learned so far. While Dr. Morales was translating brain biochemistry and cognitive pathways into language that the panel could understand, her cell phone rang. Without even looking down, she silenced it and turned it off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Damn!” Derek winced in frustration when Morales’ voicemail message began. “Yeah, Hi Elena,” he said a few moments later. “It’s Derek. Dirksen Security won’t let me in. Give me a ring when you get this. Thanks.”

He’d been to the building before, so he wasn’t exactly a stranger to the security team, but the guards here today all looked like new hires, and none of them exuded compassion. After yesterday’s attack across the capital grounds, they were all pretty jumpy, a sight that didn’t give the line of visitors he’d waited in much comfort. When he was close enough to watch, he realized that they were quickly approving people with official IDs of one sort or another, and being far more careful with people like him who had arrived without one. When it was his turn to be processed, the security agent had asked him to wait while he conferred with his supervisor. A few minutes later, they asked him to take a seat in the waiting area, which was when he’d pulled out his cell phone.

He looked around at the rest of the corralled visitors. Two of them were verbally sparring over which one had a more disastrous flight to DC, and one was reading an eBook on her palmtop. Derek took a vacant seat facing the entrance, and retreated into self-absorption, wondering what symbolic secrets Bartholdi had buried in the design of his fountain.

As he sat there studying a conjured image of the sculpture’s faux brick crown, he stared blankly at the intermittent glow of daylight coming through the main entrance. The juxtaposition of the two images reinforced his feeling that whatever Bartholdi’s secret was, it lay in this symbolically protected spot. But what could it be? What sort of metaphysical enigma required two layers of mystical beings to hold it aloft?

“Hi John!”

His reverie faded as a familiar voice penetrated the mental haze he’d generated, a voice he’d heard in passing earlier in the day. Squinting against the glare from between the slowly closing doors, he smiled in synchronicous amusement when he recognized who it was: the dark-suited gentleman who had delivered a load of DuraBars to the hospital. As before, he was wheeling in a hand truck stacked with PanAgra’s hot product of the day, but this time he wasn’t alone. Apparently the man knew the security staff, because several of them dropped what they were doing to help speed along his delivery.

Derek watched while one guard opened the top box and removed a bundle of chocolate bars, and another hurriedly approved the man’s younger associate. When they were both finished, they shook his hand and sent him further into the building. With that completed, they made a cursory check of the older man’s corporate ID and sent him through as well. Unlike his companion, though, who disappeared down one of the long corridors, the older man headed for the main elevators. Apparently, he had other business to take care of while visiting the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

While the security staff resumed the tedium of screening an endless line of visitors, a heavy-set woman who looked like she should really have stayed home with her cold got up from a workstation adjoining the waiting area and went to get one of the DuraBars that had just been added to a big bowl behind the screening station. She stood there for a few seconds before reaching into the bowl, seemingly unsure of how to proceed.

His curiosity aroused, Derek crossed towards her. “Hi. Can I buy one of those?”

She turned slowly, the unopened candy bar in one hand, the other lightly tickling the ruffled edge where it was sealed. “What?”

“The chocolate. Can I buy one?” He glanced around the area he was restricted to. “I’d use a vending machine, but there isn’t one where I can get at it.”

“Oh.” She looked at him blankly for a second. “They’re free. Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” After taking one, he watched her carefully open the wrapper. Something about the way she moved just didn’t seem right. “Excuse me, but are you okay? I don’t mean to be rude, but you look awful. Shouldn’t you be home in bed?”

She took a bite. “I was.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story.”

Derek looked around. “I don’t think I’m going anywhere any time soon.”

“I suppose you’re right. Until they get my server back on line, I can’t finish checking you out anyway.”

He laughed. “Is that what’s tying things up.”

"Pretty much. Yeah. It's also why I was called in today."

"Then it wasn't your idea?"

"What, are you crazy? I've got a cold. I'm miserable." She took another bite, and then waved the bar in his face. "And if it weren't for these things I'd be asleep right now."

"So why did they call you in?"

"Nobody else knows the startup procedures." She looked over at the screeners. "Well, nobody around here, anyway."

"Startup procedures?"

"Uh huh. As long as the systems are running, just about anyone can do the job. But with them going down all the time, someone has to do the long security sequence to get back in each time. You know; logins, passwords, stuff like that. Anyway, that's me."

"I see. So why don't they just train someone else to do it?"

"With what? There's no manual."

"Then how did you learn it?"

She looked off into the distance. "Aretha showed me. Well, before she got this disease, anyway."

"Disease?"

"Sure. You've heard about Burnout Fever, haven't you?"

"Who hasn't?"

"Well, after she got it, all she was interested in were her dogs. They had to let her go."

"And you?"

"I guess I was lucky. Or maybe someone was keeping an eye on me. Whatever it was, I'm still able to do my job. I understand that's pretty unusual, though."

Derek studied her for a few seconds. "You're right. It is. Any idea why?"

"Not a clue. All I know is that I was working when it happened, and my job is about the only thing that interests me anymore. In fact, I like it even better now, or at least I don't have trouble concentrating like I used to."

"Isalyn?" The supervisor was standing by her station.

"Yes?"

"Looks like they're up finally. Could you get us back in, please?"

"Sure." She turned back to Derek. "Look, I've got stuff to do."

"Thanks for chatting." He held out his hand. "Derek Boa. Glad to meet you!"

She took it and smiled. "Isalyn Maufry. Do you come through here much?"

"Sometimes."

"Stop and chat next time, okay?"

"Sure thing."

Back in his seat, Derek watched while Isalyn plowed through the tedious process of re-establishing her secure network resource base. She seemed more relaxed, hunched there over the keyboard, than she had while chatting with him. As she paused for another bite of time-release chocolate, it seemed to Derek that the effects of getting Burnout Fever had made the comfortable pattern of her job the place she really preferred to be, even over the prospect of recovering from her cold in a warm bed.

One by one, the people who had been in the waiting area before him were allowed to go. Each time, she made a notation in her log, and then called one of the security workers over. He countersigned, prepared a visitor badge, and handed it to the person who had just been cleared. When it was Derek's turn, however, she studied him curiously for a moment and then waved him over.

"Is there a problem?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Did you have something to do with yesterday's attack on the Rayburn building?"

He shrugged. "I was there. Why?"

"Well, according to this, you were seen loitering in Bartholdi Park while the police were setting up their barricades. You've been seen there frequently. There are pictures."

"So what? I like to have lunch by the fountain."

She looked again at her screen. "Maybe so, but your behavior triggered someone's curiosity. They look for patterns. Yours suggested that you might have been acting as a lookout for the group that planted the toxin."

He laughed nervously. "Well, I'm not. So what happens now?"

Before she had a chance to answer, they were both startled by the sound of Bob Dylan's signature tune on his cell phone. Taken momentarily by the noir melodrama, Derek didn't answer until it had nearly finished the passage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dr. Morales opened her eyes in relief at the sound of his voice. "What's going on, Derek?" She nodded at Lillian Haekson, who had just closed the hearing room door behind them.

"They think I had something to do with what happened at Rayburn yesterday."

She frowned. "They what? Look, sit tight. We'll be right down."

What they saw when they rounded the elevator bank chilled Morales and froze Haekson in her tracks: Derek stood in the middle of the security waiting area, his wrists pressed together, while a uniformed guard fastened a plastic restraint. The line of people waiting to be screened whispered among themselves. One wagged a camera phone for a moment, and then chattered excitedly to it. He watched helplessly as Morales crossed the lobby, Melissa's Aunt Lilly a few steps behind.

"May I please speak with the person in charge?"

"I'm sorry ma'am," the nearest guard said, his hands raised to keep them back, "but we have a situation here. You'll just have to wait."

Haekson stepped closer. "I'm afraid that won't do. He's scheduled to testify at a congressional hearing in a few minutes."

He lowered his arms. "That may be, ma'am, but according to our procedures, nobody is allowed to speak with him until he's been questioned."

"By whom, and about what?"

"We have reason to believe that he had something to do with yesterday's terror attack. DC Police will be here shortly to transport him to—"

Morales winced. "There's obviously been some kind of mistake here. Derek Boa is hardly a terrorist."

Maufry, who had been watching the standoff uncomfortably, left her station and edged closer, an unopened DuraBar in her hand. "That may be true, but we won't know for certain until the evidence has been disproven. It's procedure."

"What evidence? He was with us yesterday when Congresswoman Haekson here talked Captain Mercer down from the stairwell."

Haekson glared.

The supervisor gestured for his guard to back off. "There are pictures," he said calmly. "Security cameras caught him loitering in Bartholdi Park on numerous occasions. He's been identified as one of the leaders of a group intent on destroying the constitution. Please let us do our job."

"Destroying the—? Look, Derek Boa is one of the principals of a grassroots group trying to improve congressional procedures, not overthrow the government. That's why he was asked to testify today. We're in the midst of a national crisis, if you hadn't noticed, and the Senate committee is trying to figure out how to deal with it. Burnout Fever is the biggest threat to the government right now. So if you don't want to be charged with obstruction of congress, I suggest you let him testify."

He stared at her for a moment before reacting. "Okay, look. We've called for the DC police to transport him for questioning. When they get here, you can talk to them about that. In the meantime, Mr. Boa is in our custody, and that's that."

A member of his team cleared his throat.

"What?"

"There's a problem."

"Well?"

"DC Police dispatch just called back. They're tied up with something out on the Mall, and

don't know when they'll be able to pick him up."

Morales harrumphed. "So what does your procedure tell you to do now?"

"Like I said, we hold him here for questioning."

Haekson crossed her arms. "Look, I'll make you a deal. It's very important for Derek to testify at the hearing, and you don't know how long it will be before he's cleared of this bizarre accusation and released. So why don't you have one of your people accompany him to the meeting room. He'll be cuffed and under guard, so you won't have anything to worry about. When the police arrive, they can escort him to wherever they want."

"Okay. But the moment he tries anything, or says anything out of line, we'll pull him out of there."

CHAPTER THIRTY

"May I have order, please?"

Chairman Kolya was struggling to be heard over his colleagues when Dr. Morales opened the door for Derek and his uniformed escort.

A serious-looking man in a dark blue suit quickly stepped over. He glanced down at the plastic cuffs. "Who's this?"

Derek, who was busy scanning the hearing room, craned for a better view of the witness. "I think I know that guy," he whispered to himself in surprise.

Haekson eyed the man. "Derek Boa is on the witness list," she said flatly. The room fell suddenly silent as the last two senators on the committee ceased arguing with one another.

The security escort nodded gravely. "There's evidence he's a terrorist."

Conversational vacuums never last very long, especially when a memetic charge like that is set off. The chaotic wave of voices that followed began in the adjoining seats, but soon spread to the rest of the room. By the time it reached the committee chairman, the witness had turned to see what was going on.

Derek smiled when he recognized the man who had delivered DuraBars to both the hospital staff and to this building's security team. He'd noticed the man's PanAgra ID tag while waiting to see Melissa, and was beginning to wonder what business he had here when his attention was forcibly abducted by a sudden tug on his handcuffs. He looked irritably at his escort, who was leading him towards a nearby empty seat like a condemned man on his way to the gallows. An entrance like this was not going to do much for his credibility.

Since the room didn't settle down on its own, Chairman Kolya gaveled for attention. "If we can get back to the business at hand," he said sternly, "I'd like to ask the witness to repeat his answer. We were pursuing a very important line of reasoning, and I don't think that unfortunate interruption did much to clarify the problem we're discussing." He nodded to the witness. "Mr. Grznowski?"

"Yes, well, Senators," he said uncomfortably. "As I was saying, it's not just PanAgra that is having problems. We're part of several extra-national organizations whose work makes it possible for the governments of dozens of sovereign nations, such as the United States and the members of the European Union, to operate effectively. Without the economic and regulatory coordination enforced through the concerted lobbying efforts of these organizations, national governments would be drawn into endless conflict over what they each perceives to be their own private interests."

He took a sip of water and glanced at several members of the committee. "As a result of Burnout Fever, however, our ability to provide these critical services has been so badly degraded that other forces have begun to intrude, groups who hold the stabilizing influence of the many corporate backers of your expensive programs in utter contempt. Unless these so-called public-interest groups are stopped, unless their ability to operate despite the effects of this plague is tempered, they will soon begin to sway public opinion out of the carefully crafted paths that we have developed to ensure that the needs of both governmental and corporate planners are met. If this happens, Senators, we will not be held responsible for the chaos and destruction that results."

The senator from Tennessee angrily struck the table.

Chairman Kolya glared at him, staring him down. "This time, Senator Fortaign, I'd advise you to restrain yourself. I know how you felt about being threatened by Governor Rice earlier today. This is different, however. We all know that this government cannot operate, and that few of us would have won our seats in this body without the support and guidance of the organizations that Mr. Grznowski represents. We may not always agree with them, but you cannot dispute the fact that the success of the free market, and the stability of the world economy, depends on them."

Derek raised his bound wrists a few inches and gazed down in dark amusement. Symbolically presenting the spokesman for the man's enemies in shackles offered visible reflection of the corporate lobby's intent, of a prospect that Constitutional Evolution was working so hard to derail. He hadn't pictured the unspoken struggle in such graphic form before this, though. In a way, it was like stepping into Bartholdi's fountain and taking the place of one of the sculptor's mythical figures, a change of perspective that transformed the hidden forces that influenced the course of events into palpable physical reality.

Kolya looked to his right. "Senator Maslow, you have the floor. Please keep your questions brief. There isn't much time left on your clock, and I'd like to give Mr. Grznowski enough time to answer."

Maslow nodded, and then smiled at the witness. "I'd like to thank you, sir, for being so forthcoming with your answers today. The role of corporate lobbies in government is so subtle and pervasive that we can easily forget how important it really is. Earlier today, the governor of Illinois told us that this disease has crippled the ability of state and local governments to operate smoothly, because even these governments are highly reliant on corporate resources and expertise. So that we can better understand the scope and gravity of this crisis, would you please help us to understand the extent to which we at the federal level, and our counterparts in other nations around the world, are bound up with the health of the international corporate community?"

"Certainly, sir. Let me tell you a story to illustrate." He reached into his attaché case and pulled out a DuraBar, which he placed on the table before him. "I'm sure you all know about the biological attack on the Rayburn building yesterday morning. When a crisis like that occurs, we all rely on the ability of the emergency services infrastructure — police, fire, ambulance, hospitals, communications and so forth — to handle the sudden load. But we may not immediately realize that they, too, have been affected by losses to this scourge. Because their staff, like the security team in this building, are struggling to operate despite losses to Burnout fever, the people who remain become ever more critical. While their managers keep trying to replace lost workers, those with the expertise have little choice but to work extra shifts, which puts great strain on their health. PanAgra has been quietly helping emergency services teams across the country and around the world by providing a free supply of products like this, products that enable workers to stretch their limits by keeping them alert and vital. Before coming here today, for example, my staff and I personally delivered a truckload of these to emergency services facilities across the District, as well as to the security staffs in all of the congressional office buildings. Nobody asked us to do this, Senator. It was just the right thing to do."

Derek recalled the litter of DuraBar wrappers at the hospital, and the bowl of bars in the security area downstairs. What if Malcolm Jeffries had been right about the effects of GMOs in the things? Even if they presented only a slight risk, sucking them down like the hospital receptionist did might actually make them dangerous.

Maslow looked doubtful. "Unfortunately, corporate humanitarian acts have historically hidden more profitable motives. I could easily argue that supplying free product is simply a ploy to establish habitual use of your company's chocolate bars by people in a desirable demographic, one that might be resistant to other approaches."

"I assure you, Senator, that PanAgra's support of the world's emergency services community was not instigated by our marketing division. In point of fact, when they first learned of what we were doing, they objected strenuously to the practice, on the grounds that giveaways by my associates in the government relations team would actually harm their ability to preserve the company's revenue stream."

"Regardless of your intent, Mr. Grznowski, do you deny the potential risk that you have introduced into our national security infrastructure?"

"Risk, sir?"

Maslow pointed at the chocolate bar on the witness table. "Genetically modified organisms were used in the production of that bar, were they not?"

He picked it up protectively. "Of course they were. We make no secret of that. However, the bar itself does not contain them. GMOs are used only to produce the time-release mechanism." With a single motion, he tore open the wrapper. "The chocolate itself is perfectly safe." And then he took a bite, snapping it off with a defiant flick of the wrist.

Chairman Kolya broke the brittle silence that followed. "The time of the senator has expired. The chair now recognizes the senator from California."

"Thank you." Audrey Senamin paused to adjust her mike. She may have started her second term on a whisper-thin majority, but since the beginning of the present crisis, she'd gained back her lost support on the strength of her vocal advocacy for workers displaced by Burnout Fever.

She studied the witness for a moment. "I'd, uh... I'd like to focus on the human impact of what you've been telling us, Mr. Grznowski. I'm quite familiar with the broad implications of the work done by the Hollywood lobby on copyright protection issues that affect consumers, and by the aerospace lobby on the stability of employment for factory and support workers in my state. But you've widened the picture for me. If what you say is true, if governments themselves are now at risk due to the loss of effectiveness among the supranational lobbies like the International Chamber of Commerce and the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, then the stability of the world economy is at the mercy of whatever's behind Burnout Fever."

Grznowski set the DuraBar down, and nudged it into alignment with the edge of the table. "Exactly, senator. The work done by the Business Dialog to normalize markets across the Atlantic, for example, requires the coordination of people involved with a variety of government and industrial organizations in more than a dozen countries. A network like that has to stay focused, but because of Burnout Fever, key people in numerous areas have been lost. As a result, several countries have begun crafting legislation that is not properly harmonized with the plan. Allowed to proliferate, this sort of behavior will harm consumers by blocking access to valuable goods and services from other countries. International trade will falter, and the livelihood of millions will be placed at risk."

When Derek glanced over at Haekson, he realized that she'd been unable to follow the discussion. With so many side issues being tossed in, she would have little chance of making much sense of it. She wore a very perplexed expression, and as he watched, she looked up from the witness to stare blankly at the far wall.

"And I suppose," Senator Senamin replied, "that even the World Economic Forum is having trouble because of this?"

He nodded, and glanced uneasily around the room. "Yes. In fact, unless the organizers in Davos can replace the technical staffers lost recently, their next meeting may have to be delayed. In that respect, the problems of even the largest lobby groups are indistinguishable from those of the factory line workers at Boeing or Lockheed Martin. The difference is that while that line worker may be responsible for his family, lobbies are responsible for the smooth and efficient operation of both government and industry."

Senamin looked at the Chairman. "Do I have time for another question?"

"Yes, but please keep it short."

"Getting back to your company and my constituents, Mr. Grznowski," she said slowly, buying time to frame her thoughts, "could you please tell me what PanAgra is doing to help employees who get Burnout Fever? I understand that in most cases, they cannot continue to work at their own job."

He picked up the DuraBar and took another bite before answering. "Please understand that I'm not privy to most of what happens on the manufacturing side of the shop, senator. As I understand it, though, human resources have set up an internal retraining program. When someone gets—"

At first, Senator Senamin sat patiently, waiting for him to finish his thought. But when his hand slowly sank to the table, she looked around nervously. "Are you all right, Mr. Grz—"

Haekson sighed. "He's got Burnout Fever."

Morales glanced at her, looked at Grznowski again, and then rose and headed for the witness table.

"Dr. Morales...?" Kolya began.

She held up her hand. "One moment."

While the senators watched intently, Morales knelt beside Grznowski and peered into his eyes. She held up her hand and asked him to follow her finger as she moved it back and forth across his field of view. Twice during the procedure, he tried to get a bite of the chocolate, but

each time, she carefully straightened his arm and told him to relax. When she was finished, she stood, pulled out her cell phone, and called for an ambulance.

"Is he okay? Do you know what it is?" Kolya said gently.

She nodded. "Congresswoman Haekson was right. Onset has become a lot easier to recognize since she got it, thanks to the observations submitted by our network of field researchers."

When the EMTs walked in a few minutes later, one of them reacted visibly in recognition. While he took vital signs, Morales asked if he knew the patient.

He shrugged. "Sure. He's the PanAgra guy who's been keeping us all in DuraBars. Who are you?"

"Dr. Morales. I'm with the CDC."

"Oh, right! You were with Congresswoman Haekson yesterday when we got all those people out of the Rayburn building. Is she here? I'd really like to thank her for helping Captain Mercer like that."

Haekson rose at the mention of her name. "Ted Bartok?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Thanks."

After the EMTs wheeled Grznowski out and the crowd had a few minutes to settle down, Chairman Kolya called the hearing back to order. "Well, I guess we're going to have to find someone else to pursue any unanswered questions with. Unfortunately, our next scheduled witness — Congressman Arthur Fox of Virginia — is in the hospital, recovering from the effects of yesterday's terror attack. We had asked him to talk about the effects of losses on congressional staff and on the processes that they support."

Haekson frowned.

"That brings us to our final witness. Derek Boa is one of the principals of a grassroots group called Constitutional Evolution. He and his associates have been exploring alternative sets of rules, hoping to improve the efficiency of the legislative process. Mr. Boa, please have a seat at the witness table."

Derek rose with a sigh of resignation. His escort followed, and sat beside him. While the senators watched, he awkwardly scratched his nose, and laid his cuffed hands on the table.

Kolya eyed the guard. "Would you please explain why Mr. Boa is in restraints?"

"Yes, sir. Senator, we have reason to believe that he is a terrorist. DC Police will be here soon to take him in for questioning."

Derek assessed the panel doubtfully. How seriously would they take him now? If he objected to the accusation, it would only reinforce the presumption of guilt. Better to just ignore it.

He took a breath and calmly made eye contact with the chairman. "Congressman Fox was going to brief me about the session yesterday, so I find that I'm at a bit of a disadvantage here. How can I help you?"

Kolya templed his fingers. "We're trying to understand how Burnout Fever has affected the ability of the government to operate. From what we've been told, Mr. Boa, the effectiveness of some grassroots groups does not appear to have been harmed by losses to the disease. We were hoping that you would be able to tell us why. Congressman Fox had requested that you be added to our witness list, to provide a contrast to what he was going to report about how congressional staffs were handling it."

"I see." Derek glanced down at the half-eaten DuraBar. "It might be best to start with some background, especially in light of some of the things that your previous witness had to say. There's a significant difference between real grassroots groups and the corporate-sponsored facades that present themselves that way in an effort to game the system. Unfortunately, it's not easy to know which is which, a situation that companies like PanAgra take advantage of in the name of public relations.

"If all you see are their respective messages and the events they stage to present them, then you might conclude that there are segments of the population supporting each side of whatever issue they are facing off over. Looking at who benefits from their conflicting positions, however, reveals a part of the difference. Real grassroots groups typically support perspectives that place corporate and other powerful interests at a disadvantage, while the sponsored ones reinforce those interests, even when their arguments focus on other aspects of whatever issue is involved. And, of course, the sponsored groups have far more money to throw at the problem than those that depend entirely on the resources of their individual members.

"But if money and alignment were the only differences, Burnout Fever would equally affect both kinds of groups. And as you have pointed out, this is not the case. That's because the critical

difference is in how they are organized. Since sponsored groups are directed by outside forces — corporations, industry organs, religious bodies, and even governments — they by necessity operate under a command-and-control model. This causes the internal structure of the group to reflect that model, which means that they have a hierarchy of authority and subservience. Under normal conditions, this is a source of strength, but when pieces of that structure are lost to Burnout Fever, it can become fragile and, if enough people are lost, to collapse.

“Contrast this to the way a true grassroots group is organized. Here, each of the people involved has a vested interest in the outcome. Some are affected directly; others feel a duty to those who are. But they are all willing to take on whatever role is required to achieve that objective. Their structure is therefore a form of network, and the leadership can be changed without altering the nature and objectives of the group. When a group like this loses members, the group itself is not affected. In fact, losing people actually strengthens them because it induces others to step into leadership roles on their own, rather than being selected or appointed.”

Suddenly confronted with the unbidden memory of Bartholdi Fountain, Derek paused to take a sip of water. “Does that help, Senator?”

Chairman Kolya thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. If what you say is true... then even the federal government is at risk here.”

He nodded. “That’s correct, sir. It is. That’s why my group has been exploring alternatives to the existing legislative procedures.”

“Well.” Kolya nervously glanced at his fellow senators, most of whom were also showing signs of discomfort. “Under the circumstances, I think we can best pursue this discussion informally. So if any of you have something to say, or have a question for Mr. Boa, please go right ahead. Just don’t hog the floor.”

Senator Maslow cleared his throat. “Please help me to understand something, Mr. Boa. You say that hierarchical organizations like corporations and governments become fragile when they lose people, but that networked ones like yours are actually strengthened. As I understand it, the FAA attempted such a strategy when they adopted a buddy system to protect the airspace over Chicago against new cases of this disease. But as the governor of Illinois told us this morning, the traffic controllers couldn’t keep up with the extra workload. I don’t see the basis for your claim.”

“I understand your confusion, senator. The FAA’s strategy may seem to add a network aspect to their organization, but it doesn’t really. What they’re doing is essentially giving each controller additional jobs to do. In other words, they’re asking their staff to hold up more parts of the existing command-and-control structure, rather than changing it. Their environment is still hierarchical. The work of supporting the structure gets juggled around, but you can only keep so many balls in the air, so to speak, at one time.”

A senator from the other end of the dais picked up the thought. “If I understand you correctly, the controllers managed their heavier workload the same way that the airlines dealt with Midway being closed. It was like a game of musical chairs, except it was played with aircraft and ground facilities.”

Derek nodded. “Yes. And just like in that game, at some point competition for those limited resources can get so frantic that everyone just collapses in exhaustion. That’s what I’m afraid will happen to a lot of rigidly managed organizations — corporations and governments alike.”

“I’m getting really tired of being threatened by witnesses today,” Senator Fortaign said sharply. “First, Governor Rice impugns the integrity of this body; then Mr. Grznowski has the audacity to say that unless we muzzle anyone who challenges the corporate lobbies, the government will collapse; and now you suggest that we’re doomed by the very constitutional framework that made this nation great!”

Kolya eyed him sternly.

Fortaign leaned forward. “Well, I for one have had enough of this twaddle. Unless you have something constructive to say here, I suggest that you hold your tongue. Mr. Chairman, I move that we—”

Silenced by the crack of Kolya’s gavel, the Senator from Tennessee sat back and crossed his arms in defiance.

In the uneasy silence that followed, the rear door opened, and Isalyn Maufry walked in. After scanning the room for a second, she went to the witness table. “You’re really lucky there’s a standoff down on the mall, Derek,” she whispered. She handed the escort a sheet of paper.

While the senators watched, Derek’s escort removed the plastic cuffs. “I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. You’re free to go.”

Maufray chuckled. "Yeah. And if Homeland Security hadn't lost so many techs, they might have been able to run their analysis system correctly." She looked at the half-eaten DuraBar. "You gonna finish that?"

Derek grinned and handed it to her. "Thanks. I owe you one."

Chapter THIRTY-ONE

Rodney Falk breathed. He shook his head in frustration, and looked past Malcolm Jeffries' reddening face at the line of DC police disentangling two groups of protesters in front of the Air and Space Museum. By the time he arrived, the seven spontaneous protests those officers were corralling had lost cohesion and started fighting for what they considered the best position for getting some airtime from the news crews that they hoped would soon arrive. Encountering Jeffries only served to cap an already nasty day.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll accept your contention that we're both here following the dictates of our conscience. But there's no way in hell that I'm buying your line of crap about Burnout Fever."

"Damnation Fever. But frankly, Falk, I really don't care what you think. McQuarry's followers were starving for something to do with their fervor. I gave them that outlet, and a much larger group of people joined the effort since he was pulled offstage. You may find this hard to believe, but truth proves its own validity."

Rodney raised his thumbs at the surrounding chaos. "Look around, Malcolm. You see these people? Every one of them thinks the same thing: their truth is the right one. So do the folks who come to the legal clinic where I work. Everyone has a point of view, and to some extent, they're all right — in one way or another. But the world is more complicated than that. There are a lot of truths out there, but trying to own one doesn't make you God."

"I never said I was God, you moron. Haven't you been listening? It's the angels. They're the ones in charge, not us, not the president, and not whichever all-mighty hallucination you might want to believe in."

"Oh," Rodney said in dark amusement. "I get it. You hold everyone in contempt, not just the victims of Burnout Fever. Why didn't you just say so?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere." He stared briefly at Rodney, then turned away and gazed at the National Gallery building that edged the Mall. "I only agreed to talk with you because you claimed to have some kind of proposal. That's clearly bullshit."

"No. It's not. Like I told you before, I think there's a way we can help one another. The coordination and training tools you've put together are an order of magnitude better than anything I've ever seen. If they can be used for more constructive purposes, you could—"

"Constructive?" Jeffries roared, pivoting. "Make up your mind, Falk. If everyone else has fair claim to the truth, then so do I; so does McQuarry. We both know how useful people with Damnation Fever really are. Pushing them out of positions of power, making sure that the newly incompetent don't get the chance to screw things up for the rest of us is a public service. I'm sure you know about that, working at your unprofitable legal clinic and all."

"I give up. Look, I don't want to let this drop. I know there has to be a way to work this out. I'll try again in email. All I ask is that you don't trash it before you read it. Maybe if we can eliminate the heat, we can get to the light."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever. Just don't expect an answer."

Rodney was watching Jeffries disappear into the crowd when Derek came up behind him. "What's going on around here, buddy?"

"I wish I knew, Derek. It was pretty weird, though."

"Why? What happened?"

"It's what didn't happen that really bothers me. Remember how easily all the groups got together to protest the second Gulf War? Sure, they each had their own special focus, but for some reason they were able to put it aside and formed a mass movement to protest the government's

intentions. Today, though..." He gestured aimlessly at the thinning crowds around them. "It was like they couldn't even see each other. Each group was dead on with their talking points, and acted like they were all alone out here, like they didn't even speak the same language."

Derek nodded towards two officers giving directions to a knot of people leaning on their anti-WTO signs. "So why the police?"

"I got here after the ruckus started, but from what I heard, it seems that someone yelled something about seeing a news crew pull up, only there wasn't any. After a brief halt to all the shouting, while people from different parts of the quad confirmed no sighting, a couple of neighboring groups — I think it was the eco warriors and the BF healthcare folks — started arguing over a piece of turf. I guess they wanted a better shot at some camera time. Anyway, once they stopped talking and started shoving, all hell broke loose."

Derek chuckled. "This may sound strange, but if it wasn't for this mess, I could have ended up in some gulag. Homeland Security had me pegged for a terrorist, just for hanging out in Bartholdi Park."

"Well that figures. Anyone who confuses a pizza with a hunk of iron ought to be locked up, right? Which reminds me. I just had a bit of a row with your old friend Malcolm."

"Jeffries was here?"

"Yeah. You just missed him. He was mixing with the crowd, trying to land some recruits under cover of all the mayhem. I collared him with an olive branch to break his rhythm."

"You...?"

"A peace proposal. Yeah, I know what Gisela suggested, but this wasn't just some minion, this was Malcolm himself. So I improvised."

"Did it work?"

"Not really, but at least I had a chance to size him up."

"And?"

"To coin a phrase, I think he's found his bliss. For an opportunist, he's landed in the sweet spot of his dreams. McQuarry set up the situation, but he's playing it for all it's worth. In a way, I kind of wish the screechy preacher hadn't gotten caught in his own meme. It just plays too well for Jeffries to ever want to let go of it."

He thought for a moment. "Well, if Malcolm won't go on his own, maybe someone will have to give him a push."

"Now, now, Derek." It was Amy Gratham, sans cameraman. "After what you just went through, you ought to be more careful about making threats."

Rodney waved his thumb at her. "Who's this?"

"Hey," she said in mock offense, "don't you watch the news?"

Derek was amused. "Rodney, this is Amy Gratham, crack reporter for DC First News. She's the one who got that covert footage of Congresswoman Haekson we saw over pizza last night." He glanced around. "So... where's your cameraman?"

She frowned. "That's partly why I'm here. He got Burnout Fever last night while our story was being aired. I'd just finished handing off to the studio anchor when Lee's expression went slack. Instead of rolling the camera off his shoulder and flipping it like he usually does when we wrap, he just stood there playing with it. He seemed to be taken with how it balanced. It took us a few minutes to figure out what was going on. Anyway, they have him over at the hospital for observation."

"Kinda brings the whole Burnout Fever thing home, doesn't it? How do you cover something like that?"

"You mean as a story? We don't. Which brings me back to why I'm here."

Rodney glanced around at the rapidly thinning crowd, and realized that the police had already gone. "I don't know if you'd heard, but the lack of a news crew was what stirred up this hornet's nest. If you'd gotten here a few hours ago, things might have turned out a whole lot different."

"Uh huh," Derek agreed. "And I'd probably be having a nice chat with the police or the FBI by now. I prefer it this way, thanks." He looked at Gratham curiously. "So what did you want?"

"It's kind of cold out here, and this might take a while. Feel like some coffee? I'm buying."

The three set off towards the nearest barista, but it was obvious to all of them that whatever small talk helped to pass the time wasn't what was on her mind. Fortunately, the awkward chatter didn't last long. Once they were settled around one of the small tables, Gratham took a slow breath and glanced out the window. Then, after holding Derek's gaze for long enough to make him

uncomfortable, she leaned forward and quietly said, "I think this thing is worse than anyone is willing to admit."

"Burnout Fever?"

She nodded. "Not being able to do a story on Lee made me wonder what other stories we weren't doing, what other effects of Burnout Fever were flying under the radar, so to speak. So I stayed late at the office last night and did some research."

Rodney set down his cup. "What did you find?"

"A lot. And that's just the beginning. You're familiar with the UseNet, right?"

"Sure." Derek hunched over his cup conspiratorially. "The CDC's distributed research effort depends on it. Why?"

"Well, there's a private server with some broadcast industry newsgroups on it. I scanned through some of the recent discussions, and found that DC First News isn't the only operation intentionally keeping a lid on some stories. In fact, judging from what I read, even the ones that are reported are being purposely ignored by outlets in other states. They seem to be isolating the markets."

Rodney shrugged. "Who does?"

"The corporations that own the local media outlets. Papers, TV, radio: all of them. It's covert, but enough reporters have compared notes to know that something's going on."

"So why don't they report it? It's news, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "No, not really. Besides, if this is being done on purpose, then whoever's calling the shots would spike any reports before they got out."

"You mean it's a conspiracy?" Derek said doubtfully.

"No. Nothing like that. I'm sure there are lots of hands in this, and they're probably all trying to do what's right."

Rodney almost choked on his coffee. "What's 'right'? I've had about as much of that as I can stand. Who gets to say what's right?"

"What I mean is..." she said earnestly, trying to calm him down, "I think they all have some ultimate good in mind. It might not be one that I'd necessarily agree with, but some beneficial outcome nonetheless."

"Yeah, right. Beneficial for whom?" He sat back and crossed his arms.

"Let it go, Rodney," Derek chided. "From what you told me earlier, this may be the same sort of thing that got those protest groups at each other's throats. Give her a chance, okay?"

"Sure. You were saying?"

Gratham thought briefly. "Let's just say that for whatever reasons, local news items are not getting picked up in other markets, even to the point of preventing patterns of behavior from being recognized."

"Patterns?" Rodney leaned closer.

"Yes." She looked at Derek, a touch of paranoia in her eyes. "Did you notice that there weren't any video cameras in the hearing room? You'd think that an important session like that would have been covered by C-SPAN, or at least excerpted by the national media. But it wasn't taped, not even the audio. No broadcast, no radio, no webcast. Nothing. The only evidence that it even happened, besides your own memory of it, is going to be buried in the Congressional Record, and that can be doctored after the fact, or even declared Secret. So despite the dire warnings by Governor Rice and the unfortunate Mr. Grznowski, despite your own plea for sanity, nobody is going to find out anything about it. Nobody."

"But how can they prevent—?"

"They already have, countless times." She took another sip of coffee. "Fortunately, some of the missing information has been coming to light recently, no thanks to the people in high and low places that have helped to thwart the few independent voices that have gotten out. But revelations about how corporate interests have warped both governments and the markets are nothing compared to what's going on out there right now. It's happening too fast for investigative journalists to track, and it's not visible enough for even the best newsblogger to make much sense of."

Derek emptied his cup. "Then how do you know so much? What makes you any different?"

"I don't, and I'm not. I don't have any real proof, but the things I've come across have started to suggest some sort of pattern. Now if only I could figure out what they mean."

Rodney finished his as well. "Like what?"

She followed suit. "Seconds?"

He looked askance at her as she got up to place their order. "What you do think, Derek? Is she onto something, or just on something?"

"Hard to say. I'd like to hear her out, though. One thing I do know: she seems to have taken a special interest in Congresswoman Haekson. Maybe it was seeing that runner killed by a driver with BF at the 10K run, or even something more personal, but ever since Melissa's Aunt Lilly got out of the hospital, she's been lurking. Why else would she have bothered to piece together that footage by the Rayburn Building last night?"

Rodney shrugged, and sat back to wait. When she returned with another round of lattes, he watched her stir the foam for a few seconds before speaking. "So what did you find?"

She fixed her gaze on him. "Denial. Deep denial."

"About the effects of Burnout Fever?"

"No. About our ability to survive it."

"Our...?"

"Look," she said, hands flanking her drink, "when you get the news, do you take each story on its own, or do you bother to find related stories? Is it your responsibility, or do you leave that to the analysts?"

Derek shook his head. "I don't understand. Why's that important?"

"Come on, bro'," Rodney chided. "Strategy. Context. In order to know what's important, and why, you need the background." He looked at Gratham. "What about it?"

"Ever since this Burnout Fever thing started to pick up speed, my editor and those in other outlets have been pressing reporters to stay more focused on the story being told, rather than on how it relates to other things. That's why I did all those pieces on Congresswoman Haekson, why Lee spent so much effort mating that footage yesterday."

He shrugged. "So?"

"It's intentional. There's got to be pressure on the editors to keep things isolated, to make sure the public focuses on their own problems, rather than worrying about the bigger picture."

"Pressure from who?" Rodney asked.

"What bigger picture?" Derek added.

"That's what I wanted to know, so I started digging. It seems that the PR industry has been working overtime lately. In fact, they're in such high demand that some of them have even put their services up for competitive bidding. And the service that's been most in demand has been corporate camouflage."

"Hiding what they're up to?"

"No, Derek. Hiding the fact that corporate officers, elected and appointed officials, and other public figures have gotten Burnout Fever."

The two men looked at one another. "Malcolm Jeffries."

She cocked her head. "Who?"

Derek raised a finger. "Do you remember the guy who barged into your interview with Congresswoman Haekson outside the hospital?"

"Sure, why? Was that Jeffries?"

"No. He was one of Malcolm's people, though. Jeffries fielded the organization that's been going around accusing public figures of having Burnout Fever."

"Yeah," Rodney agreed. "And you just missed meeting him back on the Mall. He was down there recruiting."

"Okay," she said slowly. "So we know the ringleader. But the response to his threats of exposure has gotten way out of proportion. For example, one side effect of covering for missing brass at some manufacturers has been the abdication of responsibility for quality control. Defective products have been flooding the market, and customers who complain are being deflected through extra layers of procedure in hopes that they'll give up. I don't know about other stations, but we lost our consumer advocate months ago."

"What else?"

"Industrial accidents are at an all-time high. It's one thing to make a defective toaster, but quite another to lose entire production facilities when line workers get Burnout Fever while operating heavy equipment. Why do you think so many airlines put their orders for new planes on hold? And don't even think about how all this is affecting the world's military forces!"

Derek took a long, slow drink while Gratham regained her composure. Rodney nervously drummed his fingers on the table.

"And according to Grznowski," she said gently, "the transnational corporate forces that they

say are responsible for holding the international markets together are faltering as well. Things don't look good. But what frightens me the most is the thought of how dependent the world has become on the technological infrastructure. Power, water, transportation, communications... They're all at risk as well."

"So why us? What can we do?"

She was quiet for a long moment, during which she looked first out the window, and then at the overly caffeinated barista struggling to keep up with the stream of customers. "I said I was piecing together a bigger picture of what's been going on. I get the sense that events seem to be reflecting some kind of shift."

"A shift?" Rodney said, at a loss for context. "What kind of shift? A shift of what?"

"Power. Influence." She paused to take another sip. "Derek, do you remember what Grznowski told the committee? The transnational economic and political influence of megalobbies like the Transatlantic Business Dialogue and the WTO is faltering, and they're afraid of losing control to grassroots groups, organizations like yours that they realize have not been affected by Burnout Fever as much as they have. Hierarchies of all kinds are—"

"Crap! Not again!"

She turned to see what the manager was yelling about. The barista who had made their drinks had stopped doing anything useful, and was trying unsuccessfully to play a tune with the steamer.

Derek nodded. "BF."

"Take that as an example," she said. "Small business; a manager and one or two employees. Lose an employee like that under normal circumstances, and you can hire a replacement pretty easily. But as the pool of talent starts to drown, as more and more potential baristas are lost to Burnout Fever, finding that replacement gets progressively harder."

Rodney finished his drink, and assessed the frustration on the waiting customers' faces. Two of them stepped out of line and left the store.

Amy Gratham gestured towards the prep station, where the manager was gracelessly taking over for his stricken employee. "Judging from the anguish in his voice, I'd guess he's been through this before. What if he can't find a replacement this time? I suppose he might try to stretch the talent he already has, but that only goes so far. Like the traffic controllers in Chicago, at some point the increasingly small safety margin disappears, and the business shuts down."

While she paused, Derek took another look around the store, and realized that the trashcans weren't in any better shape than the ones at the hospital had been.

"Now multiply that by millions of small businesses around the world. Scale it up to industrial dimensions. Translate it into corporate, government and educational terms. Even if the CDC finds a way to stop the spread of this thing, unless it can be reversed, there's going to be a global meltdown."

"You're pretty worried about this, aren't you?"

Rodney chuckled humorlessly. "Derek just loves stating the obvious."

"You're damn right I'm worried. It's just that I can't say anything about it publicly."

"Like Derek said before, what can we do? It's not like we've got much real influence."

"I think you do. You're in a pretty interesting position if you think about it. Derek's got the ear of two members of congress and a top BF researcher from the CDC — and he just made a heck of a showing at that Senate hearing; your organization doesn't seem to be affected much by losses to the disease; and it's plugged into a lot of other groups as well, from what I've been able to dig up on your members."

"Then what do you want us to do?"

"Well, someone else is going to have to figure out how to deal with Burnout Fever. I think you can do the most good by stopping the infighting among the warring grassroots groups and turning them into a productive coalition."

Derek interlaced his fingers on the table and looked at her calmly. It was one of those moments when the rest of the world manages to fade to gray, leaving you faced with a choice that you really don't want to make. "Well," he said at length, "if we're going to be playing peacemaker, we're going to need some help."

"Who'd you have in mind?" Rodney asked.

He pulled out his phone and flipped it open. "Barry Lieber."

Part 3: Network Effects

Chapter THIRTY-TWO

Barry turned off the radio and settled in for a long wait. Heading home down I-90 from a harrowing negotiating session in the Cascade foothills should have been an exercise in highway vigilance, but no amount of defensive driving would have prepared him for the sight of the metallic monster now teetering over the edge of the I-405 overpass.

According to the helicopter report that interrupted a roundup of yesterday's electoral disaster, the bizarre looking truck was custom built to transport aircraft components between Boeing's various plants. Today, it was delivering a support structure for a new plane to the manufacturing facility up in Everett. Barry peered nervously at the thing. From where he sat, it looked like the weight of the rear cabin was hanging from the cargo it was supposed to have supported, and that in turn was balanced on what remained of the railing that edged the roadway. For some reason, the rear driver had left the roadway. Barry suspected Burnout Fever.

Reporting about irregularities in the mid-term elections had placed many news outlets, including the city's newspaper and several broadcasters, in an awkward position. After downplaying rumors and accusations about whether various candidates actually had the disease, so they could focus on more traditional mudslinging, they now had to explain why they had neglected to report on those who actually had it. Their dereliction of responsibility had resulted in the election of nearly fifty candidates who had gotten Burnout Fever during their campaign, and were now incapable of taking the offices to which they had been elected. The ensuing procedural scramble had ignited a torrent of vocal demonstrations across the state.

The combination of the visceral danger in front of him and a potential firestorm of unruly political negotiations had been more than Barry was willing to deal with, so he'd turned off the radio, unclipped his seatbelt, and slumped in his seat to wait. Unfortunately, he forgot to turn off his phone.

"Hey Barr."

"You wouldn't believe what I'm looking at here, Derek."

"Listen, things have gotten pretty dicey in DC, and I was wondering if I could convince you to fly out for a while."

"What? Are you nuts? Didn't you hear what happened over Elliot Bay last weekend? Thirty thousand feet isn't exactly the safest place to be these days."

"Yeah, I know. But didn't you help the controllers out there get the rules changed?"

"Big deal. So they made a spot for a guy who got BF. How's that going to help?"

"That's not the point. The FAA adopted your solution. You've helped make flying safe again."

"Oh yeah. It's safe, all right. Right up until the time the pilot goes BF on you. Besides, with Midway closed and all the routes up for grabs, it's almost impossible to get a flight. And even if you do, with the new demand pricing, the tickets are outrageous."

"All right, all right. How about if I split the cost with you?"

"I don't know, Derek. I still have Melanie to worry about. She went into a blind rage at UW on Monday. I can't just leave her here alone."

"Well, isn't there someone who can keep an eye on her while you're gone? What about those guys you two used to meet for your Sunday morning preacher thrashings?"

"Ronnie and Al? Hmmm. Well, I'd have to ask, first. Ronnie's between contracts, last I heard. Look, I'll check around and get back to you, okay?"

"Sure buddy."

He shook his head in disbelief as he ended the call, and looked out at the accident scene above. Several new sets of flashing lights now glinted off the cursed aircraft part, and the crane of a massive wrecker was slowly backing towards the front of the truck. With nothing much else to do, he searched through the phone's memory until he found the number he wanted, then pressed Dial.

"Port of Seattle, SeaTac Traffic Control. This is David."

"Yeah, Hi. This is Barry Lieber. I helped—"

"Barry! Good to hear from you. Listen, I didn't get a chance to thank you for all you did for us on Monday. How can I help you?"

He took a breath. "I've been asked to fly to DC, and I was wondering if you could tell me which carrier has the best safety record."

"I can do better than that, Barry. Hold on. Give me a minute."

The wrecker had stopped moving, and judging from the roofline of a truck he'd been eying, the sludge-slow crawl of traffic through the far lanes of the other highway had stopped as well.

"Okay. Got it. Under the circumstances, you're going to want to have as few take-offs and landings as possible, since they're the riskiest part of the trip. So go for a direct flight."

"Why's that?"

"Autopilot, Barry. Just about every carrier has issued flight directives requiring their pilots to switch to autopilot once they reach cruise."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Yes. If you have a choice, take the first red-eye of the night. Landing when traffic is low will minimize the chance of another encounter like the one over Elliot Bay."

"Thanks, David. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you."

"Sure thing."

Chapter THIRTY-THREE

"It's this one," Melanie said as she opened the book and set it down in front of him.

Ronnie had read Ferlinghetti before, of course, but he'd never considered how the beat poet's work would affect someone with Burnout Fever. The poem she'd pointed out, Number 20 from 'A Coney Island of the Mind', had always been one of his favorites.

He read the poem's scant score of lines aloud, gently caressing the sounds with his delivery, and interpreting the staggered indentations with pauses and changes in tone. Sandwich shop chatter abated during the impromptu performance. Then he smiled, sat back, and sipped his drink. "I like it, too, Mel. But what's special about it for you?"

She slowly ran her fingers over the words, as if trying to feel the meaning behind them. He'd found her sitting alone with the book when he walked in, and sat down to see how she was doing. But before he had a chance to bring up the incident at UW, she started talking about her angel sketchbook, and about the mysterious figure that had emerged from a distant reflection in the scene. That had led her to the book, and to the poet's musings on 'the pennycandystore beyond the El'.

"I think it's about me," she said, a hint of reluctance in her voice.

"About you? Why do you say that?"

"Well," she said, tapping a finger on the penultimate verse, "this section sounds like what happened the day Wilfred scared me. It was rainy and windy and I ran in here all wet. But I don't understand the rest of it."

"Is that important?"

She nodded. "Yeah, Ronnie. It is. Can you help?"

"Sure, doll." He silently reread the opening verse and closed his eyes briefly. "You know, I've always imagined this to be about childhood fascination with wonder coming face to face with the cold real world of adulthood, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe there's something deeper."

"Like what?"

"Well, take McQuarry's angels, for example."

Melanie leaned closer.

"Since we're looking for your meaning, I suppose you could think about the world they live in as being like Ferlinghetti's candy store. The jellybeans he sees there would be like the wisdom that the angels supposedly have for us."

"And the cat?" she asked, happily basking in the preacher's angel-filled realm.

"God, I suppose. Now there's a bizarre thought."

"What?"

"The cat. If it's really a stand-in for the almighty, then I suppose the candy store would have to be in Egypt, wouldn't it?"

She straightened. "What are you talking about? What's this got to do with Egypt?"

"Bast," he said offhandedly, "the Egyptian cat goddess." Then, when he realized that he'd lost her, he added, "Ah, don't worry about it. It's not important. Anyway, if the beginning is about McQuarry's angels and the end is about you, where does that get us?"

When she didn't answer, Ronnie craned around to see what she was looking at. Barry had just walked in, and he was shaking the rain off his jacket. "I thought I'd find you here, Mel. Hi Ronnie."

Melanie closed the book and scooted her chair around to make room for Barry. "How did it go?" she asked as he stepped over.

"Management agreed to use the California model, so any employees who get Burnout Fever will be covered for whatever treatment is developed. It went pretty well, I thought. But you'll never believe what happened on the way home. I was just about at the—"

He paused when the room suddenly fell silent, leaving only the voice of the TV reporter. "... an important announcement from a gathering of Midwestern governors. Here's Governor Rice of Illinois."

The image switched to a man standing at a hotel podium. Several other people waited nearby. "As a result of the economic chaos caused by losses to Burnout Fever, and the refusal of the federal government to provide any sort of assistance, the governors of the following states have entered into a new agreement: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska and Wisconsin. In order to preserve the viability of the region, and of our individual state economies, while helping our citizens to deal with the impact of this disease, we are hereby directing the state treasurers to withhold all moneys earmarked for unfunded federal mandates, and to instead use those resources to make sure that none of the affected families in our states go without food, shelter or medical care. The federal government may choose to abandon its citizens, but we will not."

While Rice took questions from the gathered press, Barry turned back to Ronnie and gazed at him for a long moment. "I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot."

"My friend Derek in DC has asked me to fly out there. Apparently, there's more going on than even that." He nodded towards the TV, and then took Melanie's hands. "Mel, I don't know how long this might take, but I know Derek well enough to know when he's scared about something. Whatever's going down, he's in the middle of it, and thinks I can help. Will you be all right on your own for a while?"

She frowned. "I suppose."

"So what's the favor?" Ronnie prompted.

"Could you keep an eye on Mel for me?"

He shrugged. "Sure. I'm unemployed, after all. But isn't it kind of dangerous to fly?"

"It's okay. I filed a flight plan with SeaTac traffic control."

Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

Barry spent the first leg of his Friday evening trip contemplating the irony.

A woman in a Metro uniform sat just behind the door, watching the man at the wheel, her fingers gripping the rail in white-knuckled apprehension. Seattle Metro knew that the riding public

had become reluctant to travel, and launched a campaign to assure them that city busses were a far safer place to be than their own cars. They had hastily recruited an army of backup drivers, people whose sole purpose was to be ready to take over in case the primary driver suddenly got Burnout Fever. The backups didn't have to be experienced, or even very good at driving a bus, because, like a spare tire, they weren't expected to do it for very long, only long enough to complete the run. The irony, of course, was that while the buddy system had been hastily instituted in field after field, the loss of Ronnie's work partner had cost him his job.

In his friend's case, the point had been writing safer code. With two sets of eyes, and an ongoing discussion of the design, the software industry benefited from a miniature community of interest focused on the job at hand. Here, though, it was more a matter of providing a hot backup, a way to recover from potential disaster while traveling in traffic or on a highway. Making the switchover quickly was essential, however, so the woman sitting across from him had to know what to look for, how to recognize onset, and be ready to pull the driver out of the way so she could take over.

Having observed the backup driver on the bus from West Seattle made him feel more comfortable sitting towards the rear after transferring to the Airport Express. As the bus sped south on I-5, he watched the jets heading in and out of SeaTac International Airport, and wondered how the flight crews would handle a pilot getting the disease while on final approach. When they approached Boeing Field, he crossed the aisle for a better view, and counted three AWACS radar planes on the tarmac.

Boeing had been pretty tight-lipped about their plans since Wednesday's highway incident. Having lost both a critical piece of an aircraft and the custom-built transport gave them not only a public relations problem, but also a loss of faith by the airlines contracting with them to refurbish several jets mothballed in the Mohave Desert. As they merged onto the final stretch of highway, he turned to look back at Mt. Rainier, its retreating glaciers glistening in the moonlight.

The SeaTac ticketing lobby was grimmer than he remembered. When he was here for the ATC meeting, the floor wasn't exactly pristine, but there was nothing like the sticky brown spill that greeted him just beyond the big sliding doors. Since it was only a quarter to nine, Barry figured he ought to have plenty of time, but just to be sure, he skirted the mess and walked down to the airline's flight status display. Scanning for his trip to Dulles, he stopped short at one to New York, and stared curiously at the city's flashing red letters.

While he was wondering what the highlighting meant, a couple towing several large suitcases approached a nearby airport worker whose uniform was augmented with enough bits of mobile computing gear to make him look like a cyborg. He tapped a few times on the keyboard strapped to his forearm, and waved them towards one of the gate concourses.

"Pardon me," Barry said after the couple had moved on, "but do you know what a flashing red city name means?"

The man smiled and raised his arm slightly. "That's one question I don't even have to look up. It's an airport change. What city?"

"New York."

"Yeah. They shut down La Guardia this afternoon for safety reasons. Not enough traffic controllers available to keep things going at all three airports."

"You mean like Midway?"

"Pretty much, except that it's a much bigger area and there are three major airports. I guess they could have shut down any of them, but it made more sense to pick either JFK or La Guardia, since they're closer together. Kennedy's bigger, so they pulled LGA."

"Is that likely to happen at other cities with multiple airports?"

"It might. Where are you headed?"

"Dulles."

"I don't think you'll have anything to worry about. The FAA is shunting available controllers to the DC airports to make sure the government can still travel."

"Thanks. By the way, how do you like that gear you're wearing?"

He grinned. "It's great, especially the covert display in my glasses."

Barry pointed at the small LCD beside the keyboard. "I thought that was your readout."

"It's one of them." He looked away briefly, his expression growing dour. "Look, I just got an alert. Have a safe trip."

Barry adjusted the suitcase's shoulder strap and walked over to the vacant bay of self-service kiosks across from the airline's ticket counter. Although he punched in the data it requested,

nothing happened for almost a minute. Eventually, an incomprehensible error dialog appeared. After puzzling over it briefly, he sighed, slunk across the lobby and waited for the airline's one open ticketing station.

When he handed the agent his ticketing printout, she looked at him blankly for a few seconds, and then suddenly brightened. "Hey, you're Barry Lieber!"

"Well, yeah. That's what it says on my reservation, doesn't it?"

"No, I mean you're the guy that helped the traffic controllers."

He shrugged. "So? Do I win a prize or something?"

"Depends. Want a good seat? I can bump you up to First Class."

"Really?"

"Sure. Give me a few minutes."

"Thanks!" He glanced at her nametag. "I really appreciate this, Bella."

While he watched, she pulled a thick binder from under the counter and started paging through it. She tabbed through several screens, filling fields and making selections along the way. Then she crossed her arms and stared in annoyance at the monitor. "You know, if they'd have hired me to test their code, it probably wouldn't have so many stupid bugs in it."

"You're a tester?"

She nodded and leaned towards him conspiratorially. "You don't think I work here because I like it, do you? And this manual... I can't believe they paid someone to write this thing. It's terrible."

"So how come you're here? Aren't there any open testing contracts? I mean, with so many people getting Burnout Fever, wouldn't they be screaming for viable talent?"

"I wish. Unfortunately, their management monkeys would rather cancel new projects and starve existing ones than admit they have a problem. It's ludicrous." After another arduous battle with her ticketing software, Bella finally got it to accept the seat change. "Here ya' go," she said, handing him a fresh ticket folder. "Have a safe trip."

"Thanks." Barry grabbed his bag and headed towards the gate concourse, joining a handful of travelers quietly waiting to relinquish their expectations of privacy at the security checkpoint. Even judging from their strained body language, though, it was pretty obvious that the security workers weren't especially comfortable with what they were doing. Well, except for the guy happily wandering everyone who went past. Twice while Barry waited, other members of the team had to stop him from wandering arriving passengers as they walked towards the escalator down to the baggage level.

When it was his turn, he handed the security agent his palmtop and quietly said, "Is that guy okay?"

She paused and studied him briefly. "Yeah. He's got Burnout Fever, though. He's great at following the wandering procedures, but he tends to get lost in his work."

"Is that what he was doing when he got it?"

"Uh huh. You can go through now."

As luck would have it, Barry was selected for a random search just prior to boarding the plane. While being re-wanded in a chaired-in area behind the gate counter, he noticed a handful of DuraBars on a shelf under the gate agent's table, and idly wondered what Malcolm Jeffries was up to. He was still musing about the man's odd change of obsession while stowing his bag in the overhead bin, but managed to let it go by the time the flight attendant politely asked for his jacket.

While his business-suited seatmate pored over a thick pile of legal documents, Barry opened the in-flight magazine and flipped to the entertainment section. Even though David at SeaTac Tower had said that the airlines now relied on autopilot for most of the trip, he wanted to hear the switchover for himself, and that meant he needed an audio feed from the cockpit. Happily, there was one listed, so he stowed the magazine and pulled out the plastic headset.

The ground chatter was interrupted a few minutes later while the plane was being pushed back from the gate, so there wouldn't be a conflict with the safety demonstration. But in the middle of the talk, something odd happened: instead of deftly stowing the seatbelt section and grabbing the oxygen mask, the flight attendant who had taken his coat just stood there staring at the buckle. Having done countless interviews with and about Burnout Fever victims, Barry was certain that the attendant had just succumbed.

The man beside him looked up from his reading. "She alright?"

Barry strained against his seatbelt for a closer look. She'd backed into the door alcove and was running her fingers over the metal buckle. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "She might have

just gotten Burnout Fever.”

His seatmate chuckled humorlessly, and flipped another page. “Great. That’s all we need. Now who’s going to make my drinks?” Had he been concerned, the man might have reacted to Barry’s withering gaze. As it was, he simply dug deeper into whatever it was he was reading.

Since the stricken attendant was alone in First Class, Barry twisted to see where the one handling Coach was. As the recording that they had both been serving as visual aids for came to an end, the second attendant turned and started towards the front of the plane. He released his seatbelt and stood in the aisle. When the coach attendant crossed into First Class, he indicated the front of the plane and said, “We have a problem. The—”

“I’m sorry sir, but you’re going to have to sit down.”

Instead of moving, Barry looked the attendant in the eye. “Look, our flight attendant just got Burnout Fever.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken, sir. Now, if you’ll please take your seat?”

Shaking his head in frustration, he plopped down on the leather and buckled back in. He watched uneasily as the coach attendant reached his co-worker and spoke quietly to her. Mostly to himself, he muttered, “This isn’t going to be a good flight.”

The businessman beside him breathed heavily in annoyance. “Look,” he said icily, “I’ve got some important work to do. Could you please keep it down?”

Barry glared. “You don’t understand. I’ve seen this before. I’ve interviewed Burnout Fever victims, their friends, families and co-workers. I know what I’m talking about. If she really does have it, she’s in no condition to—”

“Are you deaf or something? Look, I paid top dollar for a seat in First Class so I could get some work done. If you’re going to keep bothering me, I’ll have you moved back to—”

“By who? We just lost half the flight crew! The first stages of Burnout—”

“Sir?” It was the coach attendant, and from the look on his face, he was anything but calm. “You said you know something about this?”

He nodded. “Yeah. And unless you can handle the flight without her, I suggest you have the pilot turn back to the gate.”

“This is the captain speaking. Would the flight crew strap in for takeoff. We’re next on the runway.”

“It’s too late. I’ll be back once we’re airborne.”

The businessman looked out the window. “If this keeps up,” he said as the plane started to move, “pretty soon they’ll have to start canceling flights. Maybe they should call it Incompetence Fever.”

“Why’s that?”

He studied Barry briefly. “Because that’s what it does. We were relying on a particular writer to help get this PR project started, when she came down with it. A sense of humor seems to be the first thing to go.”

“Why do you say that?”

He slid a DuraBar from his jacket pocket. “I made a joke about this, and she just stared at me.”

So did Barry. “She... didn’t happen to work for Osman Creative, did she?”

“As a matter of fact, she did. Why, do you know Melanie Stroub?”

“She’s my wife. You must be Julian McKnight.”

The two men sat in stony nonverbal antagonism as the plane rose over the west hills and turned east towards the Cascade Range. They still hadn’t said a further word to one another when the coach attendant returned. He took the empty seat across from Barry and glanced towards his co-worker, who was still strapped into one of the forward jumpseats. “What can you tell me about it?”

“I’ve been helping the CDC’s research team at the University of Washington, collecting data about patients and convincing area businesses to support the effort. I’ve seen enough to know that... what’s your co-worker’s name?”

“Nita.”

“That Nita has just gone through the onset of Burnout Fever.”

By this time, they’d attracted the attention of everyone else in First Class. Whispered discussions had already erupted around them, and at least a few people in Coach were beginning to get curious about what their flight attendant was up to.

“What does that mean?” the attendant asked quietly. “Is there anything we can do?”

"Well, from what I've learned, the patient's focus initially narrows down to whatever they were doing at the time it happened. That's why Nita's been so fascinated with the seatbelt demonstrator. Then, over time, they become able to engage with others. But even so, they become entrained to a single way of understanding the world, a single context." He paused to glance at McKnight. "Some are able to use other contexts, but it's neither quick nor easy for them. That's the reason why people with Burnout Fever can't usually do their own jobs afterwards. You'd be surprised how much of what we do every day is based on that ability."

The attendant gnawed his thumb in distress. "So we can assume that Nita won't be of much use. I'd better inform the captain. Thanks."

"Look," McKnight said as the attendant rose, "I'd like to apologize. When Burt Osman told me she was sick, I had no idea that—"

"And you expect me to believe an apology from someone who spins PR for a living?"

"Yes, I do. We're not in the business of lying to people, you know."

Barry huffed. "No, just misleading them, that's all. You know, in a way, we're both in the same business."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm a negotiator. My job is to get people to listen to one another. Yours seems to be giving them something insincere to say. I spend a lot of my time helping people to get past the nonsense that people in your line of work fill their heads with."

"Now you just hold on right there." McKnight was incensed. "There's more than one way to understand just about anything. What we do is—"

"Mr. Lieber?" It was the attendant again.

He turned, happy to yield to the interruption. "Yeah? What did the captain say?"

"We're continuing on to Dulles. I'll be handling both cabins myself."

"And Nita?"

"I'm going to get her settled in here, across from you. Since you have experience with Burnout Fever, you're probably the best person to keep an eye on her. Hit the call button if you need anything."

"Sure. But could you tell me something first?"

"What?"

"Will we be flying on autopilot once we reach cruise? SeaTac Tower told me that for safety reasons, the airlines had issued autopilot orders to minimize the risk of losing cabin crew to Burnout Fever."

"They're right. Don't worry, we'll get you there safely."

Once the attendant had gone, McKnight said, "Now that was good PR."

"What?"

"He assured you that you'd be safe. It's basic PR. It doesn't matter whether he's right, or even if he knows that to be a fact. The important thing was that you believed him. That's what we do."

"All right, all right. Truce."

They both watched as the now-solo flight attendant cajoled Nita into relinquishing her insistence on carrying on with her job, and then helped her get settled into the empty seat. When he pulled the headset from the seatback pocket in front of her, Barry tapped him on the shoulder. "Stay away from the discussion channels. She'll get frustrated when she finds she can't follow the conversation. You're better off with an instrumental music feed."

"Did, um..." McKnight began, "...did you find that out the hard way?"

"With Melanie, yes. But from the interviews we learned that helping patients through the first stage makes it easier on them. Less cognitive trauma."

Barry pointed at the Durabar in McKnight's pocket. "Listen, I saw a pile of those behind the gate counter on my way in. What's that about?"

He patted the sheaf of paper a few times. "It's part of this project. In fact, it's the same project that we wanted Melanie for."

"She told me. Something about a 'chocolate mess'?"

"Yeah, well. My partners didn't like the joke either. At any rate, one of our clients, PanAgra, was getting flak about the GMOs used to make the time-release mechanism in their chocolate bars. They asked us to do some damage control, and part of that involved getting them into the hands of some difficult demographics: emergency services people, infrastructure workers, flight support teams, people like that."

"But what if the GMOs really do cause problems?"

"I already told you: there are no GMOs in these things. They're only used to make them."

"So what? People don't see the difference."

"Exactly. That's what the PR campaign is all about. It's all about perception, about changing the way they see the facts, and sometimes, even changing the facts."

"Changing the facts?"

"Sure. Who do you think pays for all those studies reported in the press? They're all about swaying public opinion, about selling product. It's no different from choosing which words to use in an emotionally loaded political debate. It's all a matter of public relations."

"Speaking of politics," Barry said, enjoying the banter, "what do you make of what the midwestern governors did?"

"Bad idea. Even if they manage to help their citizens, threatening the federal government like that is going to hurt them in the long run. And I'm not just talking about the image problems they're causing themselves. It's already started to spiral out of control. Washington holds all the cards. They'll—" he pointed across the aisle. "I think your patient needs something."

Nita was hyperventilating, a pained expression on her face.

"Are you okay?" Barry asked her gently.

"Please," she panted, "please stop."

"Sure." He turned back to McKnight. "We're going to have to pick a topic and stay there. Our jumping around like that has frightened her."

"Hey, what's going on?" One of the Coach passengers, a boy about 15, wearing clothes with an intimidating look that belied his honest concern, had come forward, and was standing a few feet behind them. "What happened to the stewardess?"

Barry turned and looked up at him. "It's okay. She just got Burnout Fever, that's all. Everything's fine."

He stood there, a study in contrast, wavering on the edge of retreat into the tough character suggested by his clothes. Instead of turning back, though, he came closer, stopping beside Nita's seat and studying her hands, the thumbs of which were rhythmically tapping on the buckle of her seatbelt. "She was doing the demo, wasn't she?"

"Why do you say that?"

He glanced back into Coach. "My little brother got it, too. Ricky's only two, and he was playing with his toy duck at the time. My folks don't want to talk about it, though. They keep saying that he'll get better, but he won't, will he?"

"They don't know yet. I've been helping the CDC, interviewing people who've gotten it, and talking with their friends and families. Do you want to talk?"

He bit his lip in worry. "About what?"

"How you feel about it, for one thing. My wife got it, too, and I know it can be pretty scary."

"Is he bothering you?" A bearded man in a Pendleton vest stood behind the boy, one hand lightly resting on his shoulder.

"Hi, dad. We were just talking about Burnout Fever. He says the stewardess got it."

After glancing down at Nita, he clenched his jaw and sucked in a breath. "I've told you," he said sternly, "we don't talk about that in public. Now, if you'll come back to your seat and leave these people alone..."

Barry raised a hand in protest. "It's all right. He wasn't bothering me. Really."

"That's beside the point. One child lost to this disease is enough. There's no reason to expose my son to—"

"Burnout Fever is not contagious. You can't get it just by talking to—"

His grip on the boy's shoulder tightened. "And I suppose you're an expert on it?"

"As much as anyone, I suppose. I've been helping the research team at the University of Washington to—"

"Back to your seat. Now," he said, forcibly turning the teenager and pushing him towards the Coach section. Then, he bent closer to Barry. "I don't know who you are, but my wife was hospitalized for trying to help those people. I really don't appreciate having my family threatened simply for—"

"You must be Mr. Monahan, then. My wife's the one who put them in the hospital. And she had Burnout Fever at the time. Chris was very helpful, you know. If she hadn't offered to support the effort, I doubt any of the other businesses in the area would have, either."

Monahan crossed his arms. "Look... what's your name?"

"Barry Lieber."

"Look, Mr. Lieber, I've been reading up on this disease, and as far as I've been able to tell, they don't know what it is, how it spreads, or what to do about it. So don't tell me that my son can't catch it from the stewardess here, all right?"

"Sir?" It was the remaining flight attendant. "Would you please return to your seat?"

Once Monahan had gone, the attendant visibly relaxed. He visited with Nita briefly, and then asked Barry if he would mind helping to distribute drinks. Airline procedure had crafted the job as a two-person operation, but with his co-worker out of action, it would be difficult for him to handle alone. To accommodate the procedure to the situation, he would prepare the drinks, and Barry would simply have to ask what each person wanted, relay the request, and hand out the drinks that the attendant prepared.

While he considered the request, the attendant, who said to call him Ira, made drinks for the handful of people in First Class. A few minutes later, with Barry in front of the drink cart and Ira behind it, the two started moving slowly through the Coach section.

Things went pretty smoothly until they reached Monahan's row. For Barry, having a clearly defined role to play made the process a kind of mantra, an active meditation like working in the garden or pedaling along an endless country road. But that comfortable groove was abruptly shattered when a woman across the aisle from Monahan put down her book, looked up at Barry and shrieked.

"Who are you? Where's the other flight attendant? What's going on around here?"

Barry exchanged worried glances with Ira. "I'm just helping out. The other flight attendant has taken ill. She's resting in First Class."

"Yeah, right," Monahan grumbled. "She's sick all right. With Burnout Fever!"

"She's got what?"

Ira leaned towards her over the drink wagon. "She has Burnout Fever. There's nothing to worry about. Now what can we get you to drink?"

"Nothing to worry about?" She brandished the book in white-knuckled anger. "You're not here just to serve drinks. You're here to keep us safe in an emergency. Does this man have any safety training? Does he know how to operate the door? What happens if—?"

"Ma'am, please," Ira reassured her, "we have everything under control."

"What was that?" This time, it was a passenger near Ira. "Did you just say the other flight attendant has Burnout Fever?"

He nodded calmly. "That's right. But you can't catch it."

Monahan harrumphed. "What? He's lying. They don't know how it spreads."

Within moments, half the passengers were out of their seats, some kneeling on the cushions, others crowding the aisle, but all trying to be heard at once. Ira struggled to regain control of the situation, but he was badly outnumbered and handily drowned out.

Barry pulled an overhead luggage bay open and slammed it shut. "Quiet!"

In the momentary lull, he glanced around the cabin. "Look, we're all stuck in this plane until we get to Dulles, so if some of you have a problem, we'll have to find a way to deal with it on our own."

Several people started talking at once, stopped to look at one another when they realized that none of them was being heard, and then spontaneously relinquished the floor to the one with the most assertive body language, a woman leaning over a window seat towards the front of the cabin. When she stepped into the aisle, and it became clear that she couldn't see over the crowd of taller passengers, the crowd noisily pushed into the seating and waited.

She glanced at the concerned faces on both sides of the plane, and then looked up at Barry, who had squeezed around the drink wagon. "Let's start with some straight answers. What really happened to the other flight attendant?"

"I believe she has Burnout Fever."

A commotion broke out briefly, and then subsided. Several people asked how he knew.

"You heard them," the passengers' spokeswoman said ominously. "Are you an expert? How do you know?"

"No. I'm not an expert." He swallowed hard when a passenger struck his seatback sharply.

"But I have been working closely with the CDC's research team at the University of Washington. I've been collecting data for them, speaking with a lot of people who have gotten the disease, with their families and friends. I've seen what it looks like. My wife has it, too."

"So you've been exposed?"

He shook his head. "That's not how it spreads."

"Bullshit!" It was Monahan.

Ira turned to face him. "Can we please keep this civil?"

"He doesn't know how it spreads. Nobody does."

Barry nodded in agreement. "Mr. Monahan is right. We don't know how it spreads. But we do know that it is not contagious. You can't get it by touch, or through the air, or even by exchanging body fluids. So there's nothing to worry about."

She crossed her arms. "That's hardly the case, Mr...?"

"Lieber. Barry Lieber. Why do you say that?"

"Because ruling out some known transmission vectors doesn't rule them all out. Your logic is flawed. You can't prove a negative. So until the CDC figures out how this disease does spread, the public is perfectly well within its rights to want to avoid contact with those who have it, and with those who have been exposed."

A strong majority of passengers vocally supported their de facto leader's assertion. Someone near the rear of the plane called out, "So who here has it, and who's been exposed?" Another laughed grimly. "We've all been exposed, but at least she's up in First Class."

Barry indicated the source of the last remark. "He's right. Since Nita has Burnout Fever, we've all been exposed to it now."

"Not really." It was McKnight, who stood at the bulkhead separating Coach from First Class seating. "She's been up here the whole time."

"Fine," Barry said. "Then let's declare First Class the sick ward. Does anyone want to switch seats? If you're afraid of getting it, move towards the back of the plane; if you're not, move towards the front."

For a few seconds, nobody moved. Then the aisle erupted in shoving matches as passengers attempted to get past one another. When Ira was pushed painfully into the handle of the drink cart, he grabbed a can of soda, shook it, and then popped the top, spraying several nearby passengers and causing a brief respite to the commotion.

"Could you give us a minute to get this thing out of the way? Thanks!" With the aisle temporarily cleared, he pushed the cart to the rear galley.

Barry made his way towards the front of the plane, but stopped when he reached the woman who had spoken for the passengers. "You handled that very nicely."

"Thanks." She shook his larger hand. "I've been getting a lot of experience lately."

"Oh? What do you do?"

She laughed. "My job's irrelevant. This is about activism."

When Barry returned to the First Class section, he stood beside Nita for a moment while McKnight buckled back in. "So how would you have handled that?"

"Well, I doubt I would have let them pick their own spokesperson, for one thing."

"Why?"

"She had no standing. Negotiation only works between entities of equal stature. That's why governments deal with other governments, and businesses deal with other businesses. What do you think the sides were in this crisis?"

"Passengers, I suppose."

"Wrong. It was the airline, as represented by the flight attendant, versus the passengers. But the airline abdicated their role. That left the passengers to argue among themselves. All you did was let them choose up sides. It didn't really solve anything."

Barry craned to look back into the Coach section, where the chaotic game of musical chairs was drawing to a close. "Maybe not, but they're not fighting either."

"That's only because you've let them organize into two camps. It's a truce, perhaps, but once these people get to DC, they're going to take the experience off the plane with them and spread the divisiveness you fed."

"What was the alternative? We couldn't have them fighting one another, could we?"

McKnight grinned. "Sometimes, that's exactly what you have to do. No conflict exists in a vacuum. They all have history, and they all have repercussions. Governments do it all the time."

Barry was taken aback. "They do what?"

"They allow some conflicts to happen in order to avoid worse ones."

"Wars? You mean they knowingly allow innocent people to be killed?"

"No. They don't just allow it; they actively encourage it."

"But that's insane. I don't believe you!"

"Exactly. Now you know the power of Public Relations."

"Okay. Assuming you're right about this, why? What are the governments so afraid of that they're willing to sacrifice their own citizens' lives?"

"You're sure you really want to know?"

"What do you think?"

"Okay. You've heard about Governor Rice's secessionist threat, haven't you?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"That's just a hint of what's really going on. Governments around the world have been devastated by losses to Burnout Fever. Their military chains of command are in tatters, and their ability to operate, much less maintain, all of the technology they're dependent on is questionable. None of them are willing to admit this, of course, so they're all claiming to be immune to its effects. But none of them are. And the private businesses that those governments depend on to build their weapons, to support their economies, to operate the public infrastructure and to pay their bills are also in dire straits. And the only thing keeping all of this from becoming public knowledge is the work that people in my industry have been doing."

Barry stared at him in disbelief. "And you think that's a good thing?"

"You bet I do. If this goes on, there's a good chance that there will be a global economic and political meltdown. Open warfare between dysfunctional military forces directed by governments who don't know what's really going on is far more dangerous than any other kind of threat, and I don't care whether it's nuclear, chemical or biological."

"So what can you do? What can any of us do?"

"Just as businesses have deferred to governmental control, the world's governments will have to defer to the unifying influence of transnational organizations like the WTO."

"What? How's that going to solve anything? Aren't they just as badly affected by Burnout fever as any other business or government?"

"You're right. They aren't immune either. But that's not important. What is important is that people, businesses and governments believe that they're still functioning. As long as they do, they'll refrain from resorting to acts that everyone will regret."

"So you're saying that the federal government would condone Rice's threat to secede just to divert attention from its own problems?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, and it won't be the last. Think about it."

He did. All the way to DC.

Chapter Thirty-FIVE

Derek didn't really like getting up early, especially on a Saturday. He'd had enough of that as an undergrad, and preferred to arrange his life to avoid the need for it these days. After Wednesday's chat with Amy Gratham, though, he was willing to make an exception, especially if it meant getting a chance to visit with his old dorm buddy before they were neck deep in a sea of crises.

He'd gotten to Dulles Airport a few minutes before the jet touched tarmac, thanks to the flight information available on the Web, and found a seat in the baggage claim area. According to the flight board, the 6:30 am arrival had been almost precisely an hour late. Now if only there was a way to have the air status site tell his alarm when to go off, he could have gotten another hour's sleep.

When Barry's flight number scrolled off the sign at the baggage carousel for the last time and he still hadn't turned up, Derek began to worry. A speed-dial later, he at least knew where his friend was. The question he really wanted answered now, though, was where the Dulles infirmary was, because that's where Barry said to meet him.

"What are you doing here, Barr?" he asked after opening the door.

"Hey, Derek." He glanced around the room. "Oh, sorry. It's not for me. Nita, one of the flight attendants, got Burnout Fever just before we left SeaTac. Since I knew the most about it, I've been keeping an eye on her. They're prepping her for a ride to the hospital in a few minutes, so we

might as well get going.”

Back in the hallway, Derek pointed the way and the two headed towards the garage. “So, aside from that, how was the flight?”

“Not too bad. I got bumped up to First Class and shared the ride with Julian McKnight, the guy who freaked Melanie so badly a couple of weeks ago. I think he’s bluffing, though.”

“Bluffing? About what?”

“We got to talking about the theory of negotiation — that it’s only possible between equals — and then he leaned pretty hard on the deferral chain, the idea that in a conflict, the parties willingly defer to some higher authority.”

“So what’s the bluff? It happens all the time, just ask any cop.”

Barry chuckled. “Sure, under normal circumstances, but you of all people should know it’s not fixed in stone. After all, that’s the flaw that makes it possible for your protests to work.”

“Protests?” Derek feigned indignation. “You must have me confused with someone else. We’re far more insidious than that!”

“Well, I certainly hope so. Anyway, the whole point of staging a protest is the flaunting of that assumed authority, which implies a belief in it. I know it’s a subtle point, but it’s critical. If you didn’t accept the authority of whoever you’re confronting, there wouldn’t be any point to the action. McKnight, now, he’s in the business of presenting the appearance of authority. And he’s convinced that the only way to prevent a massive meltdown of national governments is for them to defer to the perceived higher authority of the transnational cartels. And that’s the bluff. The WTO and the others only have power because they say they do. It’s a house of cards, a stronghold of power held aloft on nothing more substantial than a lot of corporate hot air.”

For Derek, the imagery conjured thoughts of Bartholdi’s fountain, of the sculpted brickwork atop the layers of mythical figures. “That reminds me,” he said after a long pause, “there’s something I want to show you when we visit the capitol district.”

“Speaking of the district, Derek, what were you doing in handcuffs on Wednesday? Someone forwarded me a phone pic taken in the lobby of the Dirksen building.”

He waited until they’d left the building before answering. “That was an experience. On my way to the Senate hearing I told you about, building security pegged me as a suspected terrorist. They cuffed me and were planning to hand me off to the cops. Fortunately, the police were delayed, and Melissa’s Aunt Lilly bullied security into letting me go upstairs until they arrived.”

“And?”

“So there I was, all alone at the witness table, shackled, with a security guy watching me like a hawk, when they finally got it straightened out and released me. As theater, it was a pretty powerful moment, because we were just getting to the meat of my testimony.”

“How’d it go?”

Having reached Derek’s car, they climbed in and set off towards Fairfax. “Well, considering that the lobbyist who’d spoken before me went BF in the middle of a sentence, I thought my efforts to sack his alleged authority went pretty well.”

“Why? What did you tell them?”

He smiled. “Nothing that they couldn’t have figured out for themselves. One of them was getting apoplectic at the thought that the governmental structure defined by the constitution could actually be a weakness in the current situation. So I walked them through all of the unstated assumptions inherent in the design, and pointed out where it would collapse if the built-in conflicts became unbalanced. I mean, really, how can they believe that all those checks and balances would make the thing stable unless the opposing forces were evenly matched? And in any event, the whole thing’s been subverted by pressure from those transnationals, anyway. I gotta tell you, by the time I was finished, they were probably happy that the meeting wasn’t being taped.”

When Barry didn’t say anything for a while, Derek glanced over at him and noticed the pained look on his face. “Something wrong?”

As they swung through the cloverleaf and onto Route 28, he kept his eyes locked on the overpass, and then relaxed when it was behind them.

“Barry?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. After what happened the other day, I’ve been a bit wary of highway interchanges.”

“You mean when I called?”

“Yeah. The rear driver on one of those bizarre trucks that Boeing uses for transporting airplane parts went BF and hung the thing over the lower roadway. That’s what I was looking up

at when you called.”

He nodded. “So, uh, how’s Melanie doing?”

“I’m not really sure. Remember those angel sketches she was doing? Well, after the sequence led to a picture of some 50’s beatnik, she latched onto a copy of Ferlinghetti’s “Coney Island of the Mind”. She thinks one of the poems is about her.”

Derek was relieved to note that his friend was so involved in his memories that he didn’t react when they reached the interchange with US 50 and headed east. “Which one?”

“I’m not sure what it’s called, but for some reason she seems to think that the first part is about McQuarry’s angels, and the end of it’s about her.”

The image of Bartholdi fountain again swam in Derek’s imagination, only this time the circle of sea nymphs were replaced first by Melanie’s angels, and then Melanie herself. Shaking the thought from his head, he looked over at Barry. “Hey, do you mind taking a side trip before we have breakfast? I’d like to show you around GMU.”

It was still early, so there weren’t too many people around when they pulled into one of the north lots at George Mason University. Barry waited until the engine was off, and then said, “So what’s really going on out there? What do you hear from your activist buddies?”

“Well, for one thing,” Derek said as he locked the car, “there are an awful lot of Burnout victims looking for work. Even with the spotty retraining efforts, like the ones in California, too many people are still hitting the streets for the number of suitable jobs available. I mean, considering the known limitations that these people are saddled with, nobody’s making any concerted effort to create jobs for them.”

The two chatted as they strolled around campus. “Create jobs?”

“Sure. There are plenty of potential jobs, but in order for the folks with BF to be able to handle them, they need to be seriously redefined, turned into straightforward processes with easily understood instructions.”

Barry looked at him. “What? Like flipping burgers?”

“That’s a start, but a lot more can be done. So what’s happened is that the armed forces have been deluged with BF people. There’s a general perception that places like the Army, Navy and Homeland Security must have tons of well-defined but non-critical jobs to be done. Unfortunately, even if the jobs do exist, suitable instructional material, and an infrastructure to deal with the special problems faced by BF patients, doesn’t. So you end up with a lot of very frustrated people on both sides of the fence.”

“I see. Then what happens to the places where all those people used to work? I’ve been dealing mostly with the managers on this. Helping them deal with labor and benefit issues; negotiating between them and the workers that are left, workers who are frightened to death that they’ll be next.”

“You can’t tell? How do you think Governor Rice managed to pull off his dysfunctional rebellion against Federal authority? Think about it: refusing to provide services mandated by the feds may free up some money for other things, but what about the implications? What kind of things are they ditching, anyway? Rice didn’t say much about that, and the reporters didn’t ask. I’ve been talking with a local reporter named Amy Gratham about all this, and between what I know and what she’s turned up, I’d say it’s the advisors that have kept things working until now. Unfortunately, with more and more of them getting Burnout Fever, I doubt that elected officials like him are hearing enough good advice to keep them in line. Hell, the same thing’s probably happening in the Pentagon, and that scares me to death.”

Barry was silent for a few minutes, while they strolled past some classroom buildings and turned towards the quad. “Hmmm. You know, that might explain something I came across on one of the newsgroups. It seems there’s been a bidding war going on for certain kinds of defense consultants. Expertise must be in pretty short supply if they can get away with auctioning themselves off. In fact—”

Ahead of them, near the front of the library, a fight had broken out. Two groups of students were screaming at one another, and the pair who had come to grips were each trying to immobilize the other. Barry broke into a run towards the melee, and Derek followed close behind. As they drew near, they could start picking out some of what was being said.

The one on top at the moment, a stocky, bearded fellow with his knee pressing into the other man’s gut, glared at Barry. “What do you want? This is between me and Ted.”

“Look,” he said calmly, “I’m a negotiator. Whatever this fight is about, I’m sure there must be a better way to work it out.”

"Bullshit!" Then he snarled at the man he'd pinned to the cold grass. "We've been through all this before, and there's no way you're going to defend that sorry excuse for a prof any longer. Either we get an appointment to see him, or we file charges against GMU for breach of contract!"

While Barry tried to get the other man's side of the story, Derek stepped between the two groups. "Okay. Hear me out," he said quickly. "If this is what I think it is, then there's a much bigger issue than whether your professor's around. Fighting over it isn't going to solve anything. So who wants to speak for each side here? I'm taking classes at GMU myself, so I have a stake in the outcome."

By this time, the tide had turned, and Barry was trying to get the attention of the other combatant, a lighter but more athletic man with sandy hair. "Ted, listen. There's no reason to kill each other."

With his opponent splayed beneath him, Ted took a breath and glared at the intruder. "Look, I don't know who the hell you are, but all I was doing was my damn job. If you can get him to lay off, I'll let him up."

Two people converged on Derek. One of them nodded and said, "Okay, so what do you think is going on?"

He glanced at the two crowds flanking him, which had begun to attract passersby. "That maybe the professor has Burnout Fever, and that the administration is helping him hide it."

Ted looked at him. "You may be right."

The man he'd pinned struggled a bit. "Then could you please let me up?"

Within moments, the gathering had turned into a ring surrounding Barry, Derek and the two combatants. Ted brushed himself off. "Here's the deal. My work-study job is mostly coordinating the schedules of the faculty and their teaching assistants. Lately, though, it's been more like a game of musical classrooms. Some profs have reduced their class time so drastically that I can't recall the last time they actually taught a session. It's been pretty intense."

"Yeah, well," someone from the back of the crowd added, "from what I've seen around campus, students are dropping classes like flies, even leaving GMU entirely."

"You hear that?" Derek asked. "So what happens when you put those two trends together? It seems to me that what we have here is a problem the administration is afraid to look at. Teaching staff is hurting, and so is the student body. Fighting isn't going to solve this, and neither are lawsuits."

"Oh, great," Ted's former adversary said glumly. "So now what? We're still getting cheated out of the education we're paying for. Who cares why it's happening? What can we do about it?"

"Well, you can try what my associates in Constitutional Evolution have been doing: model the situation and see how to change it for the better. If you want to talk about it, I'll reserve a room in the Library for later this week. Check the notice board."

Barry waited a few minutes for the crowd to disperse, and then eyed Derek conspiratorially. "You stir up trouble just for the fun of it, don't you?"

"I can't think of a better reason. Why?"

"Breakfast. We were on our way to breakfast, remember?"

"Oh, right. Hold on a minute." He pulled out his phone and pressed a speed-dial. "Amy? Hi, it's Derek. Barry just got in. Come on by for breakfast and a briefing."

Chapter Thirty-SIX

"What do you mean, 'It's not Dylan'?"

Derek glanced down at his phone before putting it away. Amy Gratham had just called to say she was delayed in traffic, and Barry asked why he'd chosen "The Times, They are a-Changin'" for his ring tone.

"Because it's not. And for the record, I never would have used it if you hadn't invited me out to Seattle for your handfasting."

Barry plopped down on the couch. "What?"

He laughed. "Come on, you remember. That house concert you hosted? The one you described as a fun evening of visionary music for Wiccans like you and Melanie?"

"Sure, but what does that have to do with Bob Dylan? They sure didn't play any of his stuff."

"No, but when I got back, I heard about a local group that played the same sort of music. I don't care as much about the lyrics as about the music itself, and the whole idea of their fans setting up house concerts for them to play at. It's a musical version of the same kind of grassroots planning that I'm involved in."

"Yeah, so?"

Derek stopped pacing. "Did I tell you about Gisela Kilarney?"

"Are you changing the subject?"

"No. Did I?"

"I think so. Isn't she the redhead gamer?"

He nodded and started pacing again. "Yeah, that's her. Of course I didn't know her at the time. Anyway, there was a house concert scheduled at her place, and I decided to go."

"Aha! I told you I could get you hooked on cultural events. Was it a good concert?"

"Well, as it turned out, I'd hardly call what they played 'cultural.'"

"Oh?"

"Yeah. All right, the music was fine, but the songs weren't exactly about the sort of things that the group in Seattle wrote. They were about magic, though."

"Magic? That's pretty pagan, if you ask me. So what was different?"

"No, not that sort of magic. The kind used to fight demons and dragons. It was a gaming concert."

"A what?"

"Gaming. Gisela had hosted the event because the group had written some songs specifically about the game she was involved in. So was the lead singer. And the opening number was about a gamesmaster who was harassing one of the players by constantly changing the fantasy world it was played in."

Barry grimaced. "You can't mean...?"

"Yeah. They wrote some new lyrics to it. Their version was called, 'The Rules, They are a-Changin'.'"

"And that's why you use it for your ring tone?"

"Not entirely."

"Then what was it?"

"Gisela. We got to talking after the concert, and stayed up most of the night, after everyone else left."

"About what?"

"What do you think? The intersection of role-playing games and grass roots movements. Well, the idea of the house concerts was where we started, because it was so close to the way events in the group I was with at the time planned things. But we ended up discussing how role-playing techniques can be used in other contexts. That's how Constitutional Evolution was born."

"So when do I get to meet your subversive friends?"

"You are one, you twit! You just do it differently, that's all. I mean, getting people to agree to things that they don't want agree to is pretty damn subversive, if you ask me."

There was a knock at the door. It was Amy Gratham. "Hi," she said as she unbuttoned her coat. "You must be Barry Lieber. Derek thinks you can help us save the world."

Amused, he shook her hand. "That puts me at a bit of a disadvantage. All he's told me about you is that you like coffee."

"Hey, you two," Derek said while reaching for a hanger, "are garbage omelets okay?" Once he had their breakfast orders, he stepped into the kitchen nook and started cluttering the counter.

"Mochas, really, but you can probably get better ones out in Seattle."

He laughed. "I don't know about better, but we probably have more of them. At least there used to be. Most of the one-person stands in town have either shut down or cut their hours back so far they might as well be closed. You'd need a search engine to know which ones are open at any given time. Anyway, I hear you're a reporter. TV or radio?"

"Both, really." She thought for a moment. "Well, I may be losing my TV gig, now that my cameraman has Burnout Fever. But radio in any case."

Barry's smile faded. "Ouch. I hope it didn't happen during anything critical."

"No, we'd just finished a remote pickup for the evening news. Since the newsroom was

already shorthanded, they're cutting back on field teams, so I've got some spare time to kill, now."

"Well, I hope there's something he'll be able to do at the station after the effects stabilize. My wife got it while we were razzing McQuarry, the TV preacher who claimed that Burnout Fever was God's doing. She used to be a top-notch writer, but now she transcribes interviews for the CDC's research team at the University of Washington. I'm not sure what's going on in her head any more, though. At first, she spent a lot of time sketching a series of angel pictures, and now she's got something going on with one of Ferlinghetti's poems. A friend of ours is keeping an eye on her while I'm here."

"Which poem?"

"Number 20, I think. Do you know it?"

"No, but I might look it up."

"If you two have a minute," Derek called from the kitchen, "come get your eggs."

While they ate, he sporadically praised his friend's expertise, and prodded him to tell Gratham about some of the more tricky situations that he'd managed to resolve, but she was more interested in his work with Leslie Omak's Burnout Fever research group at the University of Washington. She was particularly intrigued by the variety of obsessions that BF patients had fallen into.

"So Barry," he said while clearing the table, "you didn't tell me about the flight attendant who got it. What was she doing at the time?"

He closed his eyes briefly. "The safety demonstration. She was showing how the seat belt buckled when she, uh..."

"Okay," Gratham said when she saw him falter, "let's change the subject. We've got a lot of work to do."

"Sure," Derek said helpfully, "you two get comfortable in the living room, and I'll join you in a moment."

"After Governor Rice's press conference," she said, taking a seat on the couch, "there was a virtual news blackout about the implications of his threatened actions. The only things circulating among the news services that carried the announcement at all were versions of the flurry of heavy-handed PR sheets put out by Rice's political consultants. As you'd expect, they focused entirely on the feel-good side of the conflict, on how well Burnout Fever patients in those states would be treated, and how much support would be made available to them and their families. But not a word about the cost, or the effects of any potential retaliation by the federal government."

Barry joined her on the couch. "Any idea what the feds might do?"

"No, and that's what really bothers me. While Congress gamely tries to carry on despite their losses, the administration has been making a big show of how strong they are, and contend that it hasn't affected their ability to manage the world's affairs. But from what I've been able to dig up, that's not the case at all."

Derek pulled a chair over. "Oh?"

"Sure. It's doesn't take much to figure out which unfunded federal mandates have sparked Rice's anger in the past. Topping his list is the cost of supporting the demands of the Department of Homeland Security, and there are a lot of those. With all the data sharing among intelligence and law enforcement agencies, national security has become rather dependent on what's done at the state and local level. So when Rice made that veiled threat to compromise national security, you can bet that it triggered all kinds of knee-jerk nonsense in Washington. And the possibility that the nation's security would be compromised undoubtedly caused other governments to adjust their own plans as well. Rice's ill-conceived temper tantrum in that Senate hearing has shaken the stability of the whole world."

Derek sighed. "And you think we can do something about it?"

"Yes. And I've been praying that we succeed, especially after what I heard this morning."

"What's that?"

She sat back. "Secretary of State Guillan has been in almost constant talks with other world leaders. You won't hear about this on the news, and you can't tell anyone else about it, but since Wednesday night, there have been several diplomatic crises. Frightened governments on four continents have exchanged heated words, and have threatened one another with military actions that we all know couldn't possibly be carried out competently without a solid technological infrastructure, and the staff to operate it. Judging from what things look like here, they're all in denial as well."

"Yeah," Barry said, "I can just imagine what's going on in the armed services. Seattle Metro

hired extra drivers to act as hot backups on city busses, but there's no way to do that in a single-seat jet fighter."

"And judging from what I saw at the hospital," Derek added, "their field support services are probably shot as well."

"A war under these conditions," Gratham said gravely, "wouldn't just be extremely bloody, it may also be impossible to recover from. Like an untreated AIDS patient with a compromised immune system, the world wouldn't die from the disease itself, but from all of the infections it would open the way for after the global communication and transportation infrastructure collapses. Which brings us back to why I wanted your help. In a way, gathering and strengthening the world's grassroots groups would be like fixing the immune system in that AIDS patient. It won't cure the disease, but at least it gives him a fighting chance to survive while one is developed."

Derek touched his phone. Gratham's mention of disease reminded him that he'd forgotten to call Melissa. Yesterday afternoon, her father's doctors reviewed his progress, and released him from the hospital. When he spoke with her last night, Melissa told him that Dr. Morales had to return to Atlanta, so she decided to stay at his place and help her Aunt Lilly take care of him. He was going to check in with her in the morning to see how things were going, but had gotten sidetracked with the incident at GMU. Motioning for a moment's break in the discussion, he unclipped the phone and was about to hit her speed dial when his ring tone sounded.

Barry laughed privately, eliciting a perplexed look from Gratham.

Derek glanced at the display and muttered, "Rodney." Then he clicked it on and opened his mouth to speak. But instead of saying anything, he sat quietly for several seconds, and clicked it back off. With his free hand, he grabbed the TV remote and tuned to Gratham's channel. Dr. Morales stood behind a CDC podium, adjusting the microphone. Beside her was a man wearing an ill-fitting pinstriped suit that made annoying moiré patterns on video. He had the gaunt look of someone who'd been working far too long on far too little sleep.

"Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Elena Morales, of the CDC's Burnout Fever Task Force, and this is Dr. Wayne Muhrer, from the CDC Computational Biology Center. We have two statements to make before we get to your questions. First, I'd like to announce some progress in the research effort to learn the causes of Burnout Fever and to understand how it works. Thanks to the tireless work of our field teams, we've collected a substantial body of observational evidence, and have been able to characterize the psychological and cognitive effects of the condition we've been referring to as Burnout Fever.

"We've made extensive use of Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging to help us map the changes in brain function that happen when someone first gets Burnout Fever, and during the period of stabilization. The effects appear to be localized in the Limbic System, a section of the brain that is responsible for emotions and consciousness. In simple terms, the limbic system associates meaning with experience, making it possible to recognize people and to know where you left your keys, for example. What happens in Burnout Fever is that you lose the ability to deal properly with all of the different meanings that something might have for you. This is why people with the condition find it difficult to follow changes in context: in order to make the switch, your mind must discard one set of meanings and focus instead on another set.

"Knowing this, we've been able to work backwards to start isolating the trigger. We have already ruled out anything that cannot pass through the blood-brain barrier, a set of fine capillaries that act to filter what can be carried through the blood stream into the brain itself. This means that whatever it is that causes Burnout Fever must have molecules that are below a certain size.

She stepped aside. "Dr. Muhrer?"

"Thank you. Knowing that, we used a computational model of the brain to learn how it reacts to various potential triggers. What we found was that some of the reaction products left over when genetically modified proteins are introduced into the bloodstream not only can cross that boundary, but can also affect the function of the limbic system in a way that is consistent with the fMRI maps. This does not rule out other potential triggers, however, and it does not tell us which modified proteins might be involved, but it does give us a way to refine the

search.”

He stood immobile for a long moment, staring into the crowd of reporters. Then a nervous expression began to assert itself. “Our second finding has to do with a different kind of model.” He paused again, blinking rapidly. “In our work with infectious disease, we use network models to predict how a given one might spread through the population. These models assume that a disease vector, such as an airborne virus or bodily fluids, will affect one individual as easily as another. This enables us to use statistics to characterize the patterns of spread, but it also requires some form of contact for the disease to be transmitted, even if that contact is through the agency of air or water. Well, for some reason, the data don’t match the model. There are patterns in the data, such as the many reported sets of simultaneous cases, which cannot be adequately explained. The timing implies some form of contact, but despite extensive investigation by the field teams, none can be found. We don’t know what this might mean.”

Morales stepped to the mike and waited for the crowd to quiet.

Derek leaned closer to study her image. She gripped the edges of the podium, her eyes darting around the room. “I’ve seen her being grilled by a congressional committee. She’s scared.”

“That brings me to our second announcement, which is a projection of the potential course of Burnout Fever if it cannot be checked. Because of this unknown factor in the pattern of spread, the number of people likely to get Burnout fever may exceed a critical threshold. As more and more people with specialized knowledge become incapable of using it, there is a point beyond which it will not be possible to maintain the technological infrastructure that most of the planet has become dependent upon. We’re not simply talking about our ability to make microprocessors and cell phones, but to operate the basic systems we rely on for food, clothing and shelter.

“Solving this problem is crucial, and the longer it takes, the harder it will be for the world to recover. Any resources withheld, or access denied, can mean the end of civilization as we know it.” She stopped and swallowed hard. “I’ll take your questions now.”

Chapter Thirty-SEVEN

Julian McKnight hoped that his sister was right, and tipped the cabby. After Isaac Grznowski got Burnout Fever, she’d convinced the senior partners at Scarloti, May to let her brother take over the DuraBar campaign that he’d laid out for them, and assured him that his appearance at this morning’s meeting would cement the deal. Unfortunately, the airline had lost his luggage. He’d spent hours at the baggage office, waiting impatiently while an inexperienced clerk struggled with the tracking system, only to discover that his bag had been loaded onto the wrong plane, and wouldn’t be available for delivery until sometime that evening.

Clothes with a comfortable, slept-in look weren’t exactly guaranteed to inspire confidence, but under the circumstances, they were all he had. While waiting for the elevator, he crafted an introduction that turned his unkempt appearance into an advantage by playing on Scarloti’s history of working through the night before important legal cases. As he reached for the conference room door, he silently thanked his sister for being so observant.

Instead of the serious contingency planning session that he expected to find, however, McKnight opened the door onto what amounted to a verbal rugby game. Of the dozen or so people in the room, only about half of them were actually seated. A few were standing in front of pushed-back chairs, two of those still in their seats were leaning across the table jabbing the air at one another, and one — a brunette with a French braid — stood with her back to the table, calmly

gazing out the window. Several heated exchanges were happening at once, and by quickly triangulating the combatants' supportive glances, he judge there to be roughly two camps.

"Hey!" he yelled as the door swung shut behind him. "What's going on in here?"

Everyone stopped and looked at him. The woman by the window turned around. "You're late, Julian. Haven't you heard the CDC's announcement?"

"No," he said gruffly. "I've been in a cab. Why? What did they say?"

The room erupted again, only this time at him.

He raised both hands in protest. "This isn't helping. What's this about, Lauren?"

She returned to her seat. "That Morales woman, the CDC researcher who's been hovering around congress lately, just fired a broadside into the entire biofoods industry. She says that Burnout Fever is caused by a genetically modified protein." She paused and frowned at him. "You look awful, Julian. What happened? Did you sleep in that?"

Resigned to the effects of not having an opening gambit, he sighed heavily and nodded.

"Yeah, I did. My bag's in Detroit. Now, can we get back on topic?"

Jason Scarloti, the grossly overweight founder of the firm, took the floor. "It's pretty simple, really. As far as our lobbying support for PanAgra goes, there are about a dozen product lines that make use of GMOs. Keeping those products in the public eye right now might be a problem, and we're in agreement to tell PanAgra to lay low for a while. Isaac's DuraBars, however, present a problem."

"And that is?"

"I'm sure you know their message, Mr. McKnight. GMOs are only used to produce the time-release mechanism; they're not in the product itself. So we're split: some want to lean on that message and keep pushing them, and others want to lump them with the rest of PanAgra's mess and back off. What's your take on it?"

McKnight took the empty seat beside Lauren. "I think you're all missing the point. In supplying free product for the healthcare, transportation, communications and security infrastructure, Isaac Grznowski was implementing my scheme to ingratiate PanAgra to a wide swath of the power elite. As long as it's only the presence of actual GMOs that the CDC is concerned about, we shouldn't have any trouble. If we were to suddenly stop supplying DuraBars to these people, their management chains could easily conclude that we were afraid that it's implicated in this Burnout Fever flap. That would cause PanAgra a public relations nightmare far worse than anything the CDC can stir up."

A junior member threw up his hands. "So what? I don't get it. What's so important about making sure that PanAgra cozies up to those groups?"

Scarloti cleared his throat. "I have to apologize for Ray's ignorance on this, Mr. McKnight. He's not really plugged into the larger issues that we deal with around here."

"That's all right." He laced his fingers on the table and looked coolly at the young man. "It's like this. PanAgra doesn't only make consumer goods. Among other things, they have a subsidiary in the chemical business. Some of the pesticides they make are used by the UN's drug crop interdiction program, which puts them into some pretty rarefied company. By getting 'cozy', as you put it, with the critical infrastructure of the US, we build a solid base for gaining access to all levels of a huge number of power niches. The idea of losing public confidence due to the effects of this disease is a terrifying prospect for managers in those areas. Providing product makes us their saviors: we're right there, offering the kind of help that their line workers need, and that makes them incredibly grateful."

"Then it's all about power."

McKnight chuckled. "It's always about power." Then turning back towards Scarloti, he added, "Look, could we pick this up on Monday? It's been a long night, and I could really use a shower and a change of clothes."

As the others collected their papers and filed out, he turned to the woman sitting beside him. "Good to see you, sis. How's Warren doing?"

She waited until the others had gone, and the door swung closed before answering. "His doctor is pretty sure it's Burnout Fever. Fortunately, the new insurance carrier that PanAgra ChemCo just switched to has a rider clause that covers treatment. For the moment, he's officially on leave, but the agreement he instigated among the other managers to cover for one another should the situation come up looks like it's going to pay off. They'll keep him on payroll after he stabilizes, and camouflage the situation. Thanks for offering to help set up the strategy, Julian."

He winced as concern for his brother-in-law brushed up against the irritation he'd built up

about the sudden incompetence of people who got the disease, and quickly changed the subject. "Hey, I heard that Peter landed a recurring gig at the comedy club he's been lusting after."

"Yeah," she laughed. "You're nephew's got a prime time slot there tomorrow night. Feel like going?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Great! Let's get out of here."

As he stood up, he got serious again. "One thing, though. From what I know about people with Burnout Fever, they pretty much lose their sense of humor. How does that affect Peter's material?"

She nodded. "He was really worried about that, especially after his dad came down with it. But then he realized there was a solution. Not an easy one, but a solution nonetheless."

"And that is?"

"Well," she said as she opened the door, "people with Burnout Fever don't follow conceptual humor too well, but they still find the physical stuff funny. So he's been developing a new routine that uses both kinds. He says it's a real challenge to coordinate them properly, but well worth the effect on the audience. You'll just have to see it for yourself."

Chapter Thirty-EIGHT

One moment, Melissa Fox's dream-self lay naked under a tree, making frantic moonlit love with Derek, and the next she was some sort of spider. She hung there in confusion, surrounded by too many legs, rhythmically swaying on the springy webbing, wondering what had just happened. Looking down from the crook of branch that cradled her, she realized that she was high in the tree she was just under, was still under, because she and Derek hadn't moved, hadn't stopped sharing the warmth of one another's being.

She also realized that she needed a new word. Down might mean the direction that she'd fall if the webbing broke, but being able to stick to the web regardless of what angle it might be at meant that she also needed a word for down towards what she stood on. While wondering what to call this new direction, she looked around the tree her world hung from and at the woods and rock-strewn stream beyond.

She wasn't alone. Here and there, spanning branches and anchored to boulders, were a sparkling profusion of webs, all glistening with reflected moonlight. But they weren't just spiders, those icky crawly things that had made her first camping trip so frightening, those tiny terrors that had sent her running to her mother's arms; they were her friends. She knew them. More than that, she could talk with them. Well, not like she talked with other people, more like communed with them by vibrating her legs.

She picked one at random, a spider dangling from a web anchored to a nearby oak, and called to it. Her voice came out as a jiggling of several legs, as a pattern of vibrations coursing through her web.

The distant spider crawled back up its thread and shook its own web in reply.

"I'm okay," she answered, "but a little confused."

It asked for clarification, using a circular modulation of its web to indicate global context.

Melissa stared at the distant web, wondering how to explain the fact that she wasn't really the spider she seemed to be, but was instead the woman making love below her. Frustrated at her inability to translate the thought, she vibrated, "Don't worry, I'll be all right."

But then something happened. At first, she wasn't sure where the odd sound, a kind of agonizing snap, had come from. She looked around at the other webs, hoping for a clue, but they were all still, their owners all equally perplexed. A moment later, one web jiggled in fright, the spider perched on its threads simultaneously berating itself for shoddy work and curious how an anchor could have failed like that. It scurried towards the support thread that was now waving in the slight breeze, and tried to reattach it to the bark of its tree. But after several attempts, it gave up in frustration and stared at it.

When a second snap echoed through the woods, she found that she was better able to localize it, and moved to the edge of her web for a better view. The spider community watched impatiently as their comrade gamely tried to repair the damage, and then broke out in furious vibrational discussion when it failed as well.

The two stricken spiders edged towards one another and examined each other's webs in silence. When the others noticed, they broke off their vibrational chatter and waited for one of them to speak. But before either had raised so much as a leg, a spate of popping broke out from all directions, including one that was uncomfortably close, an anchor of her own precious web, the pinion intended to support the structure against whatever breezes got through the leafy branch to her right.

But it wasn't just a loss of support — a loss of structure — that she felt, but also a more immediate kind of loss. It was as if a part of her memory had just been ripped out by force. She struggled to recall exactly what bit of her life was missing, but gave up at the prickly realization that if she'd truly forgotten whatever it was, there would, of course, be no way to remember it.

Curious about this odd relationship between web threads and memories, she turned towards one of her other supports, and imagined that she knew what bit of memory it represented. Almost immediately, she was overwhelmed by a torrent of what, for lack of a better word, she decided to think of as a lifestory. It wasn't so much a glimpse of someone else's life as a retrospective of it, because she experienced it all at once. Action and consequence were all rolled up into a single encompassing gestalt, as if she had peeked in at the iconic moment of death, when this tragic stranger's whole life was replaying in a single instant before he was thrust into whatever heaven or hell might await him.

Recoiling from the sudden onslaught of foreign memories, she stiffened in fear as the web launched into a series of wild oscillations. When she tried to find footing, to stabilize the web, she discovered that it had come free of the surrounding branches. Several other support threads had snapped in that timeless moment while she was transfixed by the simultaneity of events in that other context, and each broken thread was reflected in a further loss of memory, a further loss of the wealth of experience and self-knowledge that had until then made her sense of arachnid reality so strong.

Frightened and confused, she looked down at her human self, and then around at the profusion of webs that had surrounded her only moments before. Some of them were missing, and others were flapping loosely in the breeze, just as her own increasingly fragile web might do if any more support threads were to snap.

She looked around, counting the webs that looked about to lose their ability to support their makers, and stopped when she ran out of legs. The spiders who had spun them were frantically trying to reattach the edges, but with no success. The one she'd spoken to earlier hung, exhausted, from a thread hanging from the bottom of its badly distorted home, trying desperately to swing close enough to a nearby branch to grab it, when the remaining few anchors all broke free at once. It fell through space, trying to climb the flailing thread, until the bulk of its web surrounded it and tangled it in a sticky suffocating mass.

Melissa looked away, huddling in a ball of her own legs, afraid to glance at her webbing for fear of getting lost in another of those crazy thread-lives and not being able to return. But despite her efforts to become invisible to the world, her web shuddered, and then, after a series of support thread snaps, she fell from her branch-side home towards the ground on which she lay in Derek's embrace.

Panting, she threw back the comforter, sat bolt upright and rubbed her face. "That was weird," she moaned.

She glanced at the bedside clock. It was still dark, not yet five o'clock, and it was Sunday, so there wasn't much point in getting out of bed. And while there was probably enough time to try getting back to sleep, she was too flush with adrenaline to even try. So she stacked the pillows behind her and leaned back against them. She sat there for a while, gazing at the kaleidoscopic tricks her mind played in the dark, listening to the hush of the heater rustling the curtains, and wondering what that bizarre dream was all about. But just as a glimmer of meaning began to peek out of a dark corner of her mind, something caught her attention: the distant scraping of a chair. Someone was moving around downstairs. She grabbed her robe and went to investigate.

The lights were on in both the dining room and the living room. Her father's laptop sat before a vacant dining room chair, open and idling at his favorite news site. The subdued living room lighting was augmented by the flickering glow of the TV, but the only sound she could hear

was the high-pitched whine of the picture tube electronics, just barely audible between her breaths.

"Dad?" she said as she entered.

When he saw her approach, he slipped the earphones off and smiled. "Hi, cupcake. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Nightmare. But maybe I should be asking you that question. The doctor said you needed to get some rest."

He shrugged. "I couldn't sleep, so I came down to catch up on current events. I guess it's an occupational hazard. At any rate, now that you're up, you might as well get comfortable. Things are not going well out there."

She cocked her head. "Why? What do you mean?"

He yanked the headset cord out of the TV's jack, and the speakers came on.

"—and said that his death was directly attributable to the irresponsible and possibly treasonous acts taken last night by Governor Rice's group of renegade governors."

Melissa squinted at the screen, her eyes still bleary from sleep, and read the slug below the reporter's face.

"This is real, dad? The Secretary of State was killed in an air crash over DC?"

He nodded. "When I saw the newswire alert on my laptop, I turned on the TV to see for myself. It's a real mess."

"But what does Governor Rice have to do with it?"

He muted the sound. "Did you hear about his threat to withhold unfunded services mandated by the federal government?"

"Yeah."

"Well, last night at midnight, he and the other governors in his cartel ordered a long list of services to be cut off until Washington agrees to their terms for funding."

She winced. "But that's blackmail!"

"Yeah, it is. Anyway, some of the things on that list involved the security support that local police forces provide at transportation hubs. So as of midnight, all of the airports, bus and train terminals in every one of those states became a security risk to those in every other state, and in every country that those planes fly into."

She glanced at the muted TV, which was showing a live feed from the crash site. "Like here?"

"Uh huh. By the time the people at Homeland Security got their act together, there were hundreds of unsecured planes in the air, heading for airports here and abroad. Well, they decided to up the ante, and declared the remaining airports off-limits to any unsecured aircraft, refusing to let any of them land, as a matter of national security. The FAA screamed bloody murder, but was overruled by the President. I think they're all crazy."

"So what happened to the Secretary of State?"

"He was returning from round-the clock negotiations with a dozen countries that had made groundless accusations against one another in the past few days, and that have threatened foolish military actions as a solution. By the time his jet reached DC airspace, it was stacked up with a ton of commercial planes being denied landing permission. That's when one of the regional traffic controllers got Burnout Fever. They were already too stressed out from losses to the disease to cope with the emergency, and when that one woman dropped out, the entire system collapsed. The remaining controllers scrambled to direct all the traffic, but there weren't enough people left to handle the load. And in the confusion, someone either said the wrong thing or didn't understand a command. Guillen's jet had a series of near-misses before it was flipped by turbulence and crashed into the beltway."

"What are they doing with the rest of the planes?"

"They're letting them land and refuel, then sending them back where they came from."

"You know," Ronnie said as he eased Barry's car into an empty stall in the underground garage, "the last time I was at the UW Medical Center was to have a tooth pulled. I never got to explore the place much."

Melanie looked puzzled.

"Oh, I'm sorry, doll. We were talking about the transcriptions you've been doing, weren't we." He switched the engine off, released his seat belt, and tried again. "The smell of the parking garage reminded me of when I was here before. I had a bad toothache last year, and when my dentist tried to work on it, I gagged so badly that he told me to have the dentists at UW extract it. When I came down here, I was so intent on surviving the ordeal that I went straight to the dental office, and then straight back to the car afterwards, so I didn't see much of the complex."

"Oh," she said doubtfully. "Why did you tell me about that?"

He locked the car and shrugged. "No reason, really. I just remembered it, that's all. Look, it's not important. You were telling me about an interview you transcribed yesterday?"

Happy to be finished with the interruption, she relaxed and fell into step beside him. "Yes. It was very strange. The guy's wife apparently got Burnout Fever during surgery. She was fine before they put her under, but when she woke up in the recovery room, she didn't recognize anyone. Her memory was fine. She could describe people, places and events, but none of it meant anything to her. She didn't know who anyone was, not even her family."

He laughed grimly. "That's pretty weird. I know that when someone gets BF, they tend to become attached to whatever they were doing at the time, like you did with the angels, but what is someone doing when they're under anesthesia?"

They'd just come abreast of the short tunnel to the escalators up to the surface when Melanie broke her stride.

Ronnie glanced at her. "You okay?"

She peered nervously ahead. "I— I think that's Leslie."

"Who?"

"Leslie Omak. She's in charge of Project Iris, the Burnout Fever research team. This is her meeting we're going to."

"So why did you stop?"

"Something's wrong."

"Why do you say that?"

She pointed. "Well, look at her. She's just standing there, looking up at something. She ought to be going to her office. We're late for the meeting as it is."

Ronnie shrugged. "Then let's go."

Melanie stopped beside Omak and matched her sightline. Nothing but ceiling. "Hi Leslie. What are you looking at?"

"I'm trying to find the bird." Her voice was flat, emotionless.

Ronnie listened to the chirping for a few seconds. "It's a recording. Are you feeling okay?"

She looked at him quizzically. "Do I know you?"

"This is Ronnie," Melanie explained. "He's a friend of Barry's and mine."

"Where's Barry?"

He held up a hand to stop her from answering, thought for a moment, and then carefully said, "He had to go to Washington."

She stared blankly. "But..."

Ronnie took a deep breath and shook his head. "I thought so. Come with us."

Omak followed them onto the escalator.

Melanie nudged him. "You thought what?"

"I think she's got Burnout Fever, too."

She studied Omak curiously as they approached the top, her posture fluctuating between relief and anxiety. Once they were on the ground-level sidewalk, Melanie turned to Ronnie. "I suppose I should lead, then."

A rising commotion greeted them as they approached the curving walkway around the drop-off drive. The sidewalk was packed with a raucous crowd of protesters. Some people waved signs; others shouted epithets or chanted taunts. There didn't seem to be much coherence to the protest, though. The signs and catcalls were about various things. Some objected to Burnout Fever patients in the hospital, others demanded an end to biotech research, and a few accused the staff of covering up a wave of malpractice.

Ronnie stepped forward to size up the situation. "Okay, listen," he said, "hang on to Leslie

here and stay close.”

He led right, away from the entrance, until they were clear of the crowd, and then crossed onto the car-clogged pavement. A slow procession of vehicles inched past, irate drivers either glaring wordlessly or shouting back at the protesters. Cars heading towards the entranceway waited for passengers in those ahead of them to push their doors open against the unruly crowd; those attempting to leave were blocked by a slow-moving gaggle block on the cross street. The three slipped between a van and an SUV to the open area at the middle of the drive, and turned towards the doors.

“So far, so good, girls,” he said, stopping to read some of the signs being held aloft in front of the doors. When he came to one that read, ‘BF is BS: God’s Will Be Done!’ he shook his head in anger. “What arrogance, presuming to know Her will. Who do these people think they are, anyway?”

Melanie glanced at Ronnie, and then at the sign. After he ducked behind the middle-aged nebbish holding the sign, she followed, with Omak in tow. But instead of continuing on, she turned and sneered at him.

“What’s your problem?” he asked abrasively.

While Ronnie continued on through the crowd, she crossed her arms and said, “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah, I do!”

She pointed at his sign. “Bullshit, huh? I’ve got it, and so does she. And neither of us is going to hell!”

Omak looked around, confused.

A nearby woman spun towards them and stared in fright. “You’ve both got Burnout Fever?”

“You bet. Wanna make something of it?”

“I what?” Omak asked.

“Hey!” someone yelled. “There’s two of them right here!”

Ronnie tried to backtrack, but the crowd refused him entry.

A young man shoved the nebbish aside, yelling, “Let me though! One of them killed my mom!”

Omak gaped.

Melanie’s breath was short and sharp by this point, and she’d just begun clenching her fists when Ronnie pushed aside the two people blocking his way and grabbed her from behind in an iron bear hug, pinning her arms to her side and keeping her from moving towards the newcomer.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, “but we’re going to have to call this fight off on account of pain, the kind you don’t really want to let her give you. Here’s some free advice: never upset someone with Burnout Fever. You never know what they’re going to do, and neither do they.” He glanced at Omak. “Come on, Leslie. Let’s get out of here.”

A line of people with crude ‘VEHS’ badges stood shoulder-to-shoulder just inside the bank of doors. They all wore street clothes, and their jackets and coats were open. When Ronnie pulled the door open, several of them tensed. The one directly in front of him, a short woman with thinning, grey hair, who stood just shy of five feet, stepped forward. “Do you have business here?”

He nodded. “We’re late for a meeting of the Burnout Fever research team. Who are you?”

They let them enter, but blocked their progress. “Volunteers. We all have friends and family here, and we intend to keep them safe.”

“You’re vigilantes, then?”

She smiled. “No. Volunteers to Ensure Hospital Sanitation was formed to help keep the place clean, so the staff can focus on providing medical care. We’re standing guard here because the police haven’t arrived.”

“Then they’ve been called?”

“What do you think? You’ve seen what it looks like out there.”

Melanie nudged him aside. “Great. So can we go through?”

The lobby beyond the VEHs line was remarkably clean, especially compared to other places around town. A volunteer stood by the information desk, holding a clipboard while a worried looking couple took turns signing their names, presumably to help out.

A murmur of hushed conversation greeted them as they approached the side corridor where Project Iris was located. Melanie didn’t slacken the pace until they’d turned the corner and Leslie said, “Oh, I know where we are, now.”

A hush swept across the crowd, and several people took a few steps closer. A lean woman in

what looked like a painter's smock turned back towards the others and said, "She doesn't look too good," and then approached Omak.

Melanie spoke quietly as she passed. "Florence, it looks like Leslie has it, too."

"How do you know?"

Ronnie glanced at her before speaking. "We don't for certain, but I did a quick context test, and she didn't do too well."

Several other people began to drift closer.

Florence nodded at him. "So who are you? I don't remember seeing you around here before?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Melanie said. "This is Ronnie..." She looked at him anxiously. "You know, for all the time we spend together, I don't remember your last name."

"Kovak. Ronnie Kovak. I know Barry and Melanie from the neighborhood. He asked me to keep an eye on Mel while he's out of town, and I decided to—"

"Barry's gone? Where'd he go?"

The crowd enveloped them.

Melanie shrugged. "He's in DC. Something about saving the world."

Someone harrumphed. "A secret, huh?"

"No. Really. His friend Derek said that—"

"Can we get back to the business at hand?" someone else asked. "Leslie called us all here to discuss yesterday's CDC announcement. But if she's got Burnout Fever, who's in charge?"

"And for that matter," said another, "where can we meet? The Project Iris office isn't big enough for all of us."

Ronnie held up a hand. "Look I don't know this place as well as you folks do. Is there a conference room around here?"

There was. The group deferred to Melanie as she led Leslie in and gingerly guided her to the chair at the far end of the long table. Once they were all inside, the remaining seats taken, and the door closed, an uncomfortable silence descended as most everyone stole uncomfortable glances at Omak between looking around for someone to take the lead.

It was a standoff, something that Ronnie was familiar with from working with real-time software systems. Rather than let the situation resolve itself randomly, he decided to break the ice. "It seems to me," he said, stepping away from the wall he'd been leaning against, "that everyone here is uncomfortable with the loss of your leader. Is that what's happening right now?"

Nods and murmurs of assent answered his question.

"In that case, since I'm new here, could someone please fill me in on what's going on? Anyone? We may find a leader in the process."

Leslie peered at him uncomfortably, but didn't say anything.

"I'll start," said an owlish man seated at the table. "I'm Mort Fleming, Mr. Kovak. Ms. Omak had called this meeting to discuss how our work would be affected by yesterday's statement from CDC headquarters in Atlanta. Did you see or read about it?"

Ronnie studied the man briefly, and wondered whether his overly formal manner was cover for an extravagant personal life. "Yes. I saw it."

"Good. That saves us some time. Since you know Barry, you may know that he's been arranging interviews with patients and from people in their lives for us. The UW research team is focused on the behavioral aspects of Burnout Fever. We have a lab for recording the patient's respiration, eye movements and so forth, and we use this physiological data to analyze how it affects the person's consciousness."

Melanie glanced nervously around the room.

"Well," he continued, "according to the CDC, there appear to be two classes of patients. One group was likely exposed to some kind of GMO, and another wasn't. Finding differences between them may yield a path towards the answer to how the latter group gets Burnout Fever."

A muscular young man with a sculpted goatee took the floor. "The problem is getting that kind of detail out of the data. We've got a lot of different kinds of talent among us, even some scripting, but none of us is up to that kind of challenge."

Ronnie looked him over admiringly. "Then I guess you're in luck," he said lightly. "That's my job."

"You're a software developer?"

"Uh huh. I was working on a data mining application when my contract partner got Burnout Fever. I'm sure he'd appreciate having the code we were slinging put to such a relevant use."

A woman across the room cleared her throat. "Um, isn't that code owned by whatever

company you were doing it for?"

"So? I know how to solve the problem, so I'll just gin up some new code. Not a big deal. Anyway, is that the team's new objective?"

"It seems reasonable," Fleming agreed.

"Anything else?"

"Well, yeah."

Ronnie looked at the redheaded woman who spoke, and waited for her to drop the other shoe. "What is it, then?"

"The groups. There have been a lot of reports of large numbers of people getting Burnout Fever simultaneously, and in geographically separated locations. How about that? Is there any way to find out why, or even how that happens?"

He shrugged. "That's hard to say. It sounds like a software problem, but what do we know? What kind of data is there to work from? Who's the SME?"

Melanie stared at him in confusion. "The what?"

"Sorry. Industry jargon. Who's the Subject Matter Expert, the person who knows the most about what data was collected and how it's stored?"

Everyone looked at Leslie Omak.

"Oh."

Chapter FORTY

Julian McKnight wobbled unsteadily and peered at the building directory. His eyes stung from too much drink and too little sleep after Peter's midnight closing set at the comedy club, and his mind was busy playing dodge ball with his memories. Once he found the listing, he picked up his attaché case and drifted towards the elevators.

When he'd asked to put off further discussion until Monday, he didn't reckon with Scarloti's propensity for spending the night before a meeting buried in research. The meeting might not start until nine, after the rest of the company arrived, but he wanted Julian to join him before that, and there was too much riding on the outcome to even consider putting him off, despite the fact that he doubted he'd be much use for at least another hour.

He didn't notice when the elevator door opened on Scarloti's floor, and it had almost closed again by the time he swung his case into its path. The hallway was deserted, but smelled strongly of cleaning solvents, which, when it mixed with the taste in his mouth nearly made him gag. Thankfully, the odor beyond the shiny double doors to Scarloti, May was more palatable, but the smell of kung pao chicken at that hour of the morning struck him as a bit odd. Still, it was better than the stink outside.

A few seconds after the doors snicked shut, Scarloti called out, "Julian? Is that you?"

He turned towards the sound. "Yeah."

Scarloti stepped out of his office holding a donut. "Come on in. I think the coffee's still hot."

McKnight closed the door behind him and looked around for a place to sit. Scarloti's oversized desk was littered with papers, some of which looked about to overwhelm his keyboard. A guest chair was pushed up against the printer stand, with several empty take-out boxes teetering like a line dance against the far arm. He scooped up the leftovers and tossed them into a nearby wastebasket, brushed powdered sugar from the headrest, and moved it in front of the desk, from where he could look the fat man in the eye. Then he put his case down, took a seat, and crossed his arms.

The lawyer raised his donut. "Aren't you hungry?"

He stared impatiently. "You wanted to talk before the meeting?"

"I did. After yesterday's air crash, I decided to do some research. Losing Secretary of State Guillen may pose political problems for the administration, but installing the right replacement is more of a problem for the extra-nationals that made use of his influence in economic matters. It took them quite some time to convince him of the value of their methods, and there won't be time

to break in someone new.”

“I thought the choice of a replacement was up to the president?”

Scarloti chuckled. “It is, up to a point. But like anyone else, he needs to consult his advisors...”

“Fine, but what does that have to do with PanAgra’s chocolate problem?”

“It’s a matter of quality control, or rather, under the circumstances, the lack of it.”

“I don’t follow.”

Scarloti fished a printout from the pile of papers encroaching on his keyboard and set it down in front of McKnight. “I spent most of the night tracking through a sequence of events. We’d noticed an increase in product liability lawsuits since this Burnout Fever thing got started. In light of PanAgra’s situation, I pulled the files on theirs. It seems that their management’s been fudging some numbers and paying off a lot more inspectors lately. Now, when this happens with consumer goods, we rely on your team to put a good face on it, but their ChemCo division has also been lax, and that’s a whole different bucket of worms.”

“The chocolate, Jason,” McKnight prodded. “You called me here to talk about the chocolate.”

“I know, but in this case, the problem’s the same. Production’s down, since there aren’t enough qualified workers to keep all the lines operating, and the ones that are still running are rife with defects. With PanAgra’s dysfunctional quality control, bad product is getting out, as I said. They’ve been trying to cover the problem with new hires, but all the training materials assume a minimum base level of experience, and the people they can get simply don’t have it. All of which leads to more lawsuits, which wouldn’t be so bad if the courts weren’t in as bad a shape as everyone else.”

McKnight drummed his fingers on the table once, but then stopped and looked at them when he realized they’d gotten sticky. “I’m still waiting.”

After extracting a mostly clean napkin and refolding it for his guest, Scarloti sat for a moment in thought. “There have been some calls for new legislation or better enforcement of FTC oversight rules, at least on the consumer side of this mess.”

“And on the other?”

“That’s more of a problem. One of those annoying grassroots groups has called for a federal investigation of PanAgra. They’ve been staging protests at several ChemCo plants, including the one where your brother-in-law works, or rather where he would if he, um...”

“If he hadn’t gotten Burnout Fever. Yeah, I know. Lauren told me that they’re planning to cover for him, so he’ll still be on their payroll, even if he can’t do anything useful for them.”

He nodded. “And that’s the kind of thing that group is intent on exposing.”

McKnight shrugged. “So what? It’s not like that sort of thing isn’t happening elsewhere.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d see it that way.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how I want PanAgra protected.”

Chapter FORTY-ONE

“You know,” Barry said when Derek slowed for a traffic light on their way through Fairfax, “you never told me what you guys were doing at that CE retreat you were at when I emailed you about Melanie.”

He glanced at his friend, and then went back to scanning for uncontrolled vehicles. “I didn’t know you were interested.”

“I wasn’t at the time, but with what’s been going on lately, I think it might be good to know.”

“Sure. Hit me.”

“Well, I was wondering if it had anything to do with what you had planned for this afternoon’s meeting at GMU.”

The light changed, and he started through the intersection before answering. “Not really. That was a legislative workshop. We were exploring variations on the existing process to see how

they affected the outcome. I guess you could say it was sort of a government simulation.”

“And today’s meeting?”

“Just a discussion of the situation. In order to set up an exploratory process model like that, we’ll first have to understand how their situation works now. Typically, the dynamics are cloaked in all kinds of emotional issues, and until we can get past that to what’s really going on, until we can strip it back to the raw power dynamic, we won’t be able to model the thing.”

Derek’s phone sounded, but instead of reaching for the hands-free mount, he said, “You want to get that for me? Traffic’s a bitch.”

Barry touched the answer button, and the overhead speaker crackled to life.

“Yeah?”

“It’s Amy Gratham, Derek. Got a few minutes?”

“Sure. Barry’s here with me. What’s on your mind?”

“Did you see the president’s press conference yesterday?”

“Sure. Why?”

“After hearing all those glowing words about Secretary of State Guillen, I did some more digging.”

“And?”

She hesitated briefly. “I think they’re covering something up.”

They’d reached the building where Constitutional Evolution’s office was located, so Derek pulled into a spot and turned off the engine. “Okay, Amy. You’ve got my attention. What?”

“You heard that he’d been making the negotiation rounds for the past few weeks, right?”

“Sure. They were all over that after the crash. What about it?”

“Details of those talks were notoriously hard to come by, especially since about a week before he returned to DC. And there were no handshake pictures since then, either.”

“So? Does that mean something?”

“Yeah. I think he wasn’t even at those negotiations.”

“Then who was?”

“His staff, I think. I say this because there was a change in tempo after that. I’ve watched him long enough to know how he works. There’s a definite cadence to the negotiations he manages, and I’m certain he wasn’t there.”

Barry leaned towards the mike. “Are you suggesting that Guillen has Burnout Fever?”

“It’s one explanation.”

“Sure, but is there any way to prove it?”

Derek looked at his friend. “Not unless he survived that air crash.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Gratham cleared her throat. “There is, um, another possibility.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. What if he wasn’t even on that plane?”

Barry shifted in his seat. “Wait a minute. Wouldn’t they know? I mean, the remains would be identifiable, wouldn’t they?”

“Why? Have you heard any reports to that effect? All I’ve come up with are glossy official statements about that being his plane, and that all aboard were killed when it hit the beltway near Andrews Air Force Base.”

Derek clenched the wheel. “So you’re saying he’s still alive, that he probably has Burnout Fever, and that he’s been cloaked in secrecy to keep that from leaking out. Why would they do that?”

Barry shook his head in disbelief. “It’s the power dynamic, you should know that. Any negotiations that he wasn’t really a party to would be suspect. International relations would be put in jeopardy.” He looked at the phone. “But Amy, there’s no proof of that scenario either. Is there?”

“None. But it does fit the pattern. A lot of people in power have been hiding—”

“Yeah, we know,” Derek said, nodding. “We’ve got a meeting this afternoon with some students at GMU who think the same thing’s happening among the teaching staff there. They’re concerned that their educations are at risk. Look, we have some things to do at the CE office before the meeting. Thanks for the update. Talk to you later.”

Derek froze momentarily at the door to the office suites building where CE made its headquarters, and examined the latch, or rather the place where the latch would have been if it were still there. He looked at Barry uneasily.

Once inside, they approached a woman kneeling by the reception desk and picking up a

scattering of pens, papers and little stuffed animals. "What happened in here, Veronica?"

She rose and placed an armload of debris on the desk. "Hi, Mr. Boa. We had a break-in. The whole place was ransacked during the night, and whoever did it stole just about all the computer equipment in the building." She sighed and indicated the empty spot in front of her overturned office chair. "Mine included."

"Do the police know?"

"Yeah, but they've been so overworked it took them hours to respond to the building alarm. By the time they got here, the damage was already done. Oh, by the way, two of your friends are upstairs."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Ms. Kilarney got here soon after I did, and the blond you've had your eye on walked in about fifteen minutes ago. Melissa, isn't it? The congressman's daughter."

"You don't miss much, do you?"

She laughed. "Of course not. It's my job, after all. So anyway, who's your cute friend?"

He extended a hand. "Barry Lieber. I'm visiting from Seattle."

"Lieber? Hey, you're not the guy who conned all those businesses out there into supporting Burnout Fever research, are you?"

"The same. How did you know about that?"

"My sister. She posted a tirade to their newsgroup a while back about all the hell she went through trying to get help for her daughter, Iris. Anyway, thanks for helping out."

He was amused. "You're welcome, but I didn't do it just for her, you know. My wife's got it, too."

"Oh. Sorry. How's she doing?"

"Not too bad. She's been working on Project Iris with me. When I spoke with her last night, she said that the woman who'd named the UW research effort after your niece was finally getting some rest. It seems she got Burnout Fever in her sleep sometime on Monday morning."

She winced. "Ouch. What did that do to the research effort?"

"It threw them a curve, but a good friend of ours is helping them get through it. Well, I guess we'd better go see the damage. Nice talking with you, Veronica. Take care."

Most of the office doors they passed were open, and the people inside were cleaning up the mess. Derek called greetings to a few of them as they passed, but opened the CE office door without a word. Melissa looked up from the open filing cabinet. "I thought you two had a meeting to go to."

"We do," Derek said as he glanced around. "I wanted to print some notes out first, though."

"That might be a problem," Gisela called from the back room. "We seem to be short a few bits."

He grinned when she joined them. "So I hear. What else did they take?"

"Nothing. They didn't crack the petty cash box, and your pet sound system is still here, too." She gave Barry the once over. "Hey, you must be Derek's old dorm buddy. I've heard stories..."

He laughed "So have I. Something about a house concert?"

"Well. Then I guess you know the dark secret of the ringtone."

"Uh huh. But what do we do about the notes Derek needed? We have to go to GMU in a few minutes."

Melissa looked at him. "Wing it, I suppose. Hey, do you guys want some help?"

Derek smiled. "You bet!" Then, to Gisela, "Do you want in on this, too?"

She shook her head. "No. You three go take care of that. I'll start calling the membership to see who has copies of stuff on their own systems. With the backups gone, too, we're going to have to try to recreate the world somehow."

The four of them set quietly to work, and soon finished transforming the chaotic mess into some semblance of order. After a round of wordless goodbyes, Derek, Barry and Melissa grabbed their coats and headed for Derek's car. The brittle silence wasn't broken until Derek muttered an oath at an oblivious driver who blasted through a red light and nearly broadsided them.

"Hey," Melissa said gently, "don't be so hard on him. Who knows, he might have just gone BF."

"Well," Barry said, leaning forward in the back seat, "at least it was just a car. It could have been worse, you know. Not to change the subject too abruptly, though, what are you folks going to do about the missing PC?"

Derek shrugged. "Replace it, I suppose."

"Even so, wouldn't it be a good idea to make some changes in how you do things? I mean, from what I've gathered, you've been using the one in the office as the core of your infrastructure. Don't you think that's pretty ironic?"

"Why do you say that, Barr?"

He chuckled. "Oh, come on. Wasn't the whole point of your tirade at those senators that groups like yours don't have a command and control hierarchy; that it's their flexible structure that makes them less susceptible to collapse from losses to BF?"

Melissa craned around to look at Barry. "He's right, you know. Maybe we should take another look at our own process. You know, setting up cross-backups of files on members' laptops, networked meetings, things like that."

"Cross-backups, sure," Derek said as he made a turn, "but I'm not so sure about net meetings. The Internet is in pretty sad shape, and getting worse by the day."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I suspect the loss of technical talent to BF explains why a lot of servers have dropped off the net, and taken even more websites with them. But worse than that, a couple of NAPs have shut down."

"Naps?"

Barry nodded. "Network Access Points: the places where the various Internet backbones connect. When they fail, massive numbers of packets have to be rerouted, and the whole Internet bogs down."

"Hey guys," Melissa said suddenly, "this may seem crazy, but what you're talking about just reminded me of a bizarre dream I had the other night. I was some kind of spider, and my web anchors seemed to map to peoples' lives. When one broke free, it was like I lost a piece of my memory or something. And whole webs were coming loose. Including mine."

"You're right," Derek said, grinning. "That is weird. What do you suppose it meant?"

"How should I know," she shot back. "Do you know what Bartholdi's fountain means?"

He huffed. "I wish I did."

"Fountain?" Barry asked, glancing quickly between them.

"Yeah. Remind me to show it to you when we're in the Capitol district."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Derek stood facing the open door, flanked by Barry and Melissa, waiting stolidly for someone to join them. After checking out the key, he'd unlocked the conference room and then quickly arranged the chairs into a semi-circle with the open end facing the door. Barry suggested the orientation to invite the involvement of latecomers. The three stood on the implied arc at the open end of the circle.

Barry checked his watch for the third time, and sighed. "Ten minutes. I always get nervous when people don't show up on time for a negotiation. It's usually a non-verbal power play, and sets the stage for an awkward mismatch of communications channels."

An uncomfortable minute later, Ted, the sandy haired, athletic student facilities scheduler, appeared in the doorway, followed almost immediately by the stocky man who'd had the upper hand when Derek intervened out on the quad. They eyed one another suspiciously as they took up positions on either side of the trio. Derek stood in the center, feeling a bit like the front ball in a billiards rack.

Melissa glanced between Derek and Ted a few times before breaking the awkward silence. "Okay," she said in amusement, "if you four are just going to stand there like statues, I'm going to take a hint from my Aunt Lilly and break the deadlock." She took two steps off the implied curve and spun around to face the others. "Who wants to speak first?"

"Well, I called this meeting," Derek said, "so I'd better get things started. I'd like to apologize to both of you, though, for not being able to bring some of the materials I'd planned to have for you. Our office computer was stolen last night."

Ted nodded knowingly. "It'll probably show up on campus before dark. There's a hot black market in used hardware around here. So what were you going to bring?"

When Barry noticed the other man cross his arms and strengthen his stance, he stepped into the middle of the circle and invited them both to grab a seat. As he expected, they chose positions opposite one another, so he approached the bearded man and extended a hand. "I didn't catch your name. I'm Barry Lieber."

He glanced down, but didn't accept the offer. "Just call me Sid."

"Okay, Sid. What do you know about this black market?"

"Why are you asking him?" Ted asked derisively. "He's probably their point man."

"Why?" Sid shot back. "Because I run the render farm in the Computational Dynamics lab?"

Melissa held up her hands. "Quiet, both of you!"

"All right," Barry said evenly. "Since this issue is getting in the way, let's deal with it and put it to rest. What do either of you know about this black market?"

Sid stared Ted down. "It's simple. The stuff in the stores is crap. About eighty-five percent of them are defective, probably because the manufacturers have given up on any hope of quality control. They just box 'em up and ship 'em off, and then they throw up roadblocks to anyone who tries to get a refund or a replacement. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get any research done when the servers don't work?"

Ted smirked. "Don't give me that crap. Do you know how hard it is to run a university with an administrative PC that won't stay up long enough to sort the student body?"

"All right," Barry said sharply. "So you both have computer problems. So does everyone. Businesses are in the dumper, the communications and transportation infrastructure are shit, and a handful of governors have declared war on the federal government. If the world doesn't blow itself up before our room reservation expires, it'll be a miracle. Now can we get back to your petty dispute about the quality of your education?"

Three other people had entered during his tirade, and quietly took their seats around the circle in the uneasy silence that followed.

"Good. Now that we have some perspective about this problem, maybe we can get something accomplished."

Derek grinned at his friend for a moment before speaking. "I'm glad you could all join us. As I understand it, there are several interacting dynamics at work here. There are also a number of stakeholders to the conflict, not all of which are represented by the people in this room. The group I'm with — Constitutional Evolution — has developed a process for understanding complex situations like this, and then developing alternative methods for dealing with them. I'd planned to bring copies of the handouts I've been working on for an upcoming activist conference, but under the circumstances, we'll just have to talk it through. To start, though, let's just identify the various dynamics. Anyone?"

Melissa stood in the center of the circle, glancing apprehensively at the faces surrounding her, her fingers twitching rhythmically with each change of target. When Sid cleared his throat, she settled on him and waited, fingers extended.

"Okay, Derek," Sid said distractedly, his eyes trained on her hands, "you already know the issue that we were, um, discussing out on the quad: MIA profs. Teaching Assistants are fine occasionally, but that's all we've been getting lately, and the quality of the classes is suffering as a result."

One of the newcomers raised a finger, and Melissa twitched towards him as if she were attached to it. "If they're sick, they really ought to be relieved, and the classes reassigned to someone else."

Sid gaped in mock surprise. "Oh, you mean like if they have Burnout Fever?"

"I really don't care what they have. If they can't carry the load, they ought to drop some, just like we have to if the class load get too rough."

Derek warned to the growing involvement. "All right. What else?"

Ted crossed his arms and straightened in his seat. "Scheduling classes isn't the only problem I've been dealing with. What about the research that the university depends on? If all those missing profs really do have Burnout Fever, then they're not doing any research, either. But from what I've been able to tell, they're still publishing, or at least someone is having papers published in their names."

"Hold on a minute," Barry said tentatively. "If the research and papers are being handled by someone else, wouldn't it show? I mean, certainly for the papers, doesn't the principal investigator

give them a recognizable style? And what about the quality of the results?"

Another of the newcomers, a woman with intricately braided hair, grimaced. "Not likely. After all, if the same thing is happening everywhere, peer review has probably become a joke. I know it is here."

"Is that because so many people have become incapable of rendering opinions on them, or because the Internet's so flaky that the papers just aren't getting distributed?"

"Both, really. Take GMU, for example. There's the local review by colleagues on campus, and then a bigger one that covers the planet. It wouldn't be possible without the Internet, but some campuses have gone completely off net from time to time, and I wouldn't be surprised if any of them stayed dark. If you ask me, the black market is starting to eat it's young: they're snatching systems from their own customers when they find a higher bidder."

Derek took advantage of a momentary lull to regain the floor. "So what I'm hearing so far is that students are bailing, professors are dropping out of sight, the administration is covering for them, and the general level and availability of expertise here and elsewhere is in the dumper. Is that about right?"

"In that case," Barry said, "what about the university's corporate and governmental contracts? I've been working with the CDC's field research team at the University of Washington, so I know how dependent each side is on the other. Does anyone have any insight into how that's affected?"

"Sure do." It was Sid. "Who do you think foots the bill for the Computational Dynamics Lab? We're struggling to keep it intact, but with critical people on both sides of the contract out of action, the value of what we are able to do is questionable. I suspect that people are busy covering up the problem all the way up the line."

"You mean the corporate sponsors?"

He laughed humorlessly. "No, the government ones, especially the jerks in the Pentagon. From what I hear, they've been making specious claims about technology that's still in the labs, projects that will probably never get finished, using bluster to force some leverage on the political front."

Derek stood and joined Melissa in the center of the arc of chairs. "Clearly, there are implications of this problem that go way beyond the problem that Sid and Ted were fighting over. And it sounds like the administration has to be either willfully ignoring it, or actively complicit in covering it all up. I'd like to thank you all for coming, and for bringing up these less obvious aspects of the situation."

"Not that it helps," Sid grouched.

"Don't give up so easily. That was just the first step. Now that we have an idea of what's connected to the issue we started with, we can start building a new context, a better way to understand the problem, one that puts us in a more expansive frame of mind and includes more of the issues that we just explored."

"Oh yeah? So how do we do that?"

"In a way, it's like standing on the shoulders of the various parts of the picture, like seeing the whole thing from a kind of metaphoric distance..." He stopped and gazed at the wall for a few seconds in thought, and then he turned to look at Barry.

Melissa tapped him on the shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He shook the cobwebs out of his head, and then glanced around at each of the participants. "Anyway, the next part of the process is to look at it from the perspective of each of the stakeholders. That'll help us to get inside their heads and understand their concerns. What we'll end up with is a new perspective, one that you can think of as a kind of god's-eye-view. Then, the final part of the process is to run a round-table seminar to model the situation and develop alternative actions for the stakeholders. When we get to that, we'll need people to take the roles of each of the stakeholders, and to act out how a person in that position would react to each step of the scenario we'll be running through. Since that's where all this began, let's start with one you're all pretty familiar with already, the perspective of a student here at GMU. Any takers?"

Chapter FORTY-THREE

“Well, Mugwump?” Ronnie Kovak asked the cat, “are you going to join me or not?”

He sat there, wrapped in a thick terry robe, one hand on the lever that extended the recliner's footrest, and watched the fat calico studiously ignore him as she finished giving herself a tongue bath. Since he and Al no longer joined Barry and Melanie for their Sunday morning McQuarry bashings, Ronnie didn't pleasure his lover awake, but let him sleep in and recover from the grueling schedule his software contract forced on him. Instead, he got comfortable in the living room with a steaming mug of cocoa, made the rounds of his usual web hangouts, and stroked Mugwump's soft fur.

Or he would if the calico ever got around to joining him on the chair. He watched her for a while, imagining that he could reach across the room and scratch her behind the ears. What he could do was sense the cat's emotional state. It wasn't much different from the kind of feelings he got when Al was in distress for some reason, or better yet, when he was in a playful mood.

Al's cat, however, was getting old, and needed a ramp to make it up to the recliner's seat, which was why Ronnie was waiting to extend the footrest. When she finished her bath and came close, he nudged the lever, extending it like an upholstered boat ramp, and then waited for her to get all four legs aboard before raising it the rest of the way. As she got settled in beside him, he opened his laptop and started the mail reader.

Nested between a string of suggestive junk mail and some notes from friends was a message that caught his attention. The title read, 'Webcast Announcement,' and it was from McQuarry's Shasta Lake Commune domain.

“What do you make of this, Mugwump?” he whispered. “It looks like someone's taking over for our favorite piñata. What do you say we go take a look?”

A few moments later, the site's video window opened, and he sat sipping cocoa while watching the winged 'A' logo flap silently in the digital breeze. It continued to flap even after the scheduled start time for the webcast, so he stretched out, closed his eyes and meditated on the low rumbling from the cat beside him.

In his mind's eye, a variation of McQuarry's logo rumbled through Seattle like a Metro bus with wings. When it reached the Space Needle, it swooped under the old monorail track like a runaway rollercoaster, made a barrel roll through the midway, and stopped suddenly in front of a plate glass window that seemed to stretch on forever like an invisible wall, separating him from the colorful free-form façade of the Experience Music Project.

He was still hanging there, wondering what it might mean, when another sound shattered his reverie, a gentle female voice he'd heard before, but couldn't quite place. He looked at the screen, expecting to see the face associated with that voice, but the winged logo still hovered in its digital limbo.

“I apologize for these technical problems,” she said, her French Canadian accent highlighted by a staccato counterpoint of keystaps, “but I'm doing this webcast solo, and I'm not that familiar with the equipment.”

“Isn't that the woman who did the voice-over intro for McQuarry?”

The cat ignored him, squirming onto her side so he could rub her belly. He complied.

“There. I think that's got it.”

The logo abruptly vanished, revealing a badly framed shot of a trim, brown haired woman with the carriage of a Yoga instructor. Ronnie judged her to be about forty. “Ick,” he said, studying the woman's pale face. “Either she doesn't know anything about stage lighting, or she really doesn't care what she looks like on video.”

“Good morning,” she said hesitantly, “I'm Sheralyn Fornét. If you've been a regular member of Reverend McQuarry's Internet congregation, you may recognize my voice. I did the introductions and the closing credits.”
Ronnie nodded in satisfaction. “Yep.”

“After Reverend McQuarry got Burnout Fever two weeks ago, just about everyone left the commune. There had been so much bad publicity about what people were doing in his name that I considered leaving as well, but someone I'd like to tell you about convinced me to stay and talk with you all this morning.”

Mugwump yawned and laid her head on the edge of the laptop.

“Her name is Masra, and Reverend McQuarry would have called her an Angel. What she calls herself is an entity; a being that simply lives in a different reality than we do. I’ve known about her for years, but never really let her be herself. Like many of you, I accepted the words and ideas that McQuarry and others have used to explain what they are and how we are related to them. But a week ago we had a long talk, and I’d like to share with you some of what we spoke about.”

She paused and looked into the camera for a moment.

To Ronnie, it seemed that she was studying his face, her brown eyes alive with the fire of someone on a mission.

“To give you a sense of place, let me set the scene for you. If you’ve ever dreamed, then you know the feeling of being somewhere that doesn’t really exist. Yet while you’re in the dream, it’s real enough. Before last week, I had the comfortable sense that someone was watching over me. I felt safe in the knowledge that whoever it was had the vision to see any troubles that lay ahead, and the compassion to nudge me in the right direction when danger loomed. I suspect that a lot more people feel this way than are willing to admit it, and most of them tuck the feeling into a package called God, or in McQuarry’s case, Angels. It was personal, because it was about me, yet it was also impersonal, because I had no way to see it, to touch it, to invite it for dinner. But because I had a handy way to label it, I didn’t really think about it much, and came to rely on its presence.”

Ronnie glanced around the room — at the angel tapestry that his mother had made to bless their union, at the plants that relied on him for their light and water, and at the dove sculpture that he’d fallen in love with at a craft fair. Then he scratched Mugwump behind the ears. “Do you feel that way about us, kitty?”

Fornét smiled, and visibly relaxed. “A week ago, I dreamed I was in some kind of library. There were shelves of book all around, rooms and rooms of them. After wandering for a time through a dozen rooms flanking an endless hallway, I grabbed a book that caught my eye, a thick volume with a silver cover, to see if I could read it. That’s something I’d never been able to do in a dream, because the words were always fuzzy. I slid my thumb between the pages and started to read a bit of someone’s life, but a moment later I realized that although I was reading the book, I wasn’t reading words. I stared into the wafting cloud of shifting colors that seemed to go right past the page in my hand, and let it fall. I was still standing there, shaking and scared, staring in disbelief at the strange thing resting on my foot, when someone came up beside me and said my name.”

She stopped, her breath coming short and deep as if she’d just relived the fright. Then she stepped out of frame for a few seconds and returned holding a glass of water. “I’m sorry. This is not really like me.” She took a long slow drink, and then cupped the glass in her hands. “She told me that I’d known her for years, but had never before come looking for her. She said her name was Masra, and that she was worried about me.”

“I told her that I didn’t know what she was talking about; that I as far as I knew, I was simply having a dream. A really strange one, but a dream nonetheless.”

“She laughed, and when she did I could feel it welling up inside me, like there was some kind of connection between us. She said there was, but that she was worried that it would soon break.”

“I stared, afraid to say anything, and told myself to remember what she looked like, because I had a feeling that I might need to. But even though I spent

what felt like minutes examining her face, studying what she wore and how she stood, for the life of me I can't remember any of it."

Mugwump stood and stretched, then looked up at Ronnie. He wondered how he appeared to the cat, and what she remembered about him when he wasn't around.

Fornét took another drink. "The next thing I knew, we were sitting in another room somewhere, a small, featureless place with a single table and two fabric chairs. Masra was telling me about the world that she knew, a world in which we were their dreams. I said it was odd that we should each think of the other as a dream, but she explained that's the way realities connect to each other. In her world, some people dreamed one life at a time, and others dreamed many at once. That's much harder, of course, and takes time to learn. But for those who can do it, life became so much richer when their dream selves in our world began allowing themselves to sense the presence of those other dream selves, what we would think of as other people in other times and places."

Ronnie stroked Mugwump, who was still looking up at him, and she settled back into the space between him and the arm of the chair.

She blinked a few times, her face showing a growing unease. "That's when Masra slumped, a sight that I also felt, and knew that whatever it is that's happening in her world, she was only telling me a part of it. I reached across the table to touch her, to comfort her, but when I should have felt flesh, I just got dizzy and pulled my arm back. She said that there was some kind of sickness spreading in her world, that more and more entities had begun to lose contact with their dream selves. Some of them, she reluctantly confessed, had even disappeared. And none of them knows why."

A chill ran up Ronnie's back, causing him to shudder, which jiggled the laptop and induced Mugwump to jump down from the chair.

Fornét stepped towards the camera. "And that is what I wanted to tell you. I don't know what it might mean, or who needs to get this message, but I would like to ask each of you a favor. I'd like you to dig into your soul, and to see if there is a connection to something that you already know. If there is, I ask you to take whatever action you see fit. I may be back next Sunday. For now, though, I wish you all well, both the people seeing this webcast, and the entities they are connected to, if indeed those connections still exist."

Chapter FORTY-FOUR

"Thanks, Sid. I'll see you in a few minutes, then."

Barry put the handset down and stared at the tiny screen of his open palmtop on Derek's coffee table. When Ronnie called on Monday night and asked him to moderate a web conference between Project Iris and some members of the Burnout Fever Usenet group, he hadn't counted on Derek needing to take his laptop during the day. It wasn't that he didn't like the thing — it was a lot more convenient than a full size system, especially when traveling — but for some things the screen was just not big enough to turn around in. The office suite he used at least had optional bits of interface that he could live without, things like toolbars and floating palettes, but for moderating a web conference it was like admiring the Grand Canyon through one of those annoying hotel door peepholes.

Still, being confined like that did have one redeeming value: it gave him a first hand feel for what the world must be like for Melanie. He imagined that trying to follow the kind of free-range discussions that they once had would be, for anyone with Burnout Fever, like having only a word processor window in front of you, and suddenly getting a cryptic error message from the spreadsheet you forgot you left running.

He picked up the palmtop, started a web browser, and typed in the location of the site that was hosting the conference. After logging in to the virtual meeting space, he spent a few moments adjusting the frame borders so he could see the main discussion pane and the stack of participant status icons while still leaving enough room to type in stage directions. Then he sat back to wait. It was still a few minutes to three in DC, and neither group was yet represented at the Seattle-based noontime meeting.

About a half dozen people had logged in by the time Sid arrived. Since it didn't look like he'd be needed for a while, he put the palmtop down on a history book that Derek had left on the coffee table, and went to get the door.

The bearded man who ran the GMU Computational Dynamics Lab turned out to be an unexpected ally. His name wasn't really Sid, but he preferred it to Selwyn, the one he'd been given to commemorate a granduncle who'd died the day he was born. And even so, it wasn't so much a name as an acronym, for his legal name was Selwyn Ira Donahue.

Instead of saying anything, Sid pulled a folder from under his coat and handed it to Barry, then laid the coat over the arm of a nearby chair. He stood silently, adjusting his weight from foot to foot, while Barry leafed through the stack of glossy simulation images.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'm stumped. Why did you want to show me these?"

"Because I think we can use some of the same techniques to project the course of Burnout Fever, assuming that its not checked anytime soon."

Barry waved the stack of paper. "I don't understand. What do simulations of the turbulence along a fighter wing or the heat signature of cooling steel have to do with Burnout Fever?"

"Everything. Those problems were also intractable until people began modeling them. I think I can use the software we made these with to build a visual model of what Burnout Fever is doing to the human network."

He looked at the pictures again. "How?"

"This isn't exactly straightforward, so bear with me. Those images are really just snapshots of a dynamic process, rendered in a way that makes them easier to understand. All it takes to be able to make one is a way to describe the process as if it were made up of a collection of discrete particles, and then calculating the speed and direction of each one. So even though we're modeling fluids, the software treats them like objects. People have already used the technique to model avalanches, and that's what gave me the idea."

Barry glanced at his palmtop before stepping towards the couch. "What idea?"

Sid followed, but remained standing when Barry sat down. "When you model an avalanche, you're really modeling the forces that each grain of sand or flake of snow puts on those around it. Well, if we were to take a snapshot of the human web, we could model how people are related to one another, how they depend on each other and are affected by one another. In other words, we could graphically represent the various kinds of community and the chains of dependence that tie us all together. Once we can do that, it's fairly simple to declare any of them as having Burnout Fever, which would let us see how the loss of those people strains the communities, and breaks the chains of dependence."

"All right. I buy all that, but how could you possibly get the data you need? What would you base all those communities and chains on?"

He grinned. "But that's the beauty of it: we don't have to! Like lots of other things, the human web is what's called a scale-free network. I won't bore you with the math, but the point is that there's a power-law distribution of the sizes of communities, and the size of people's circle of friends. In other words, there are a lot of tiny nodes, and just a few really big ones." He traced the curve in the air. "And that means we can use one scale-free network to represent another one."

"And I suppose there's one you do have the data for?"

"Sure: the Internet. Pages are like people, sites are like communities, and links represent the interactions that define chains of dependence. So what do you think?"

Barry glanced at the palmtop's display. A conversation had already started, and several of the status icons were vying for attention. "Well, if the sad state of the Internet is any indication of what may happen to us, I think we're in big trouble."

"Then you think it's worth trying?"

"Sure. Why not? Give me a call when you have something, and we'll show it to a CDC researcher that Derek knows. Listen, the BF research group I work with just started a net meeting. Since you've offered to help, why not stick around?"

Barry scooped up the wireless palmtop and the two men adjourned to the kitchen table so they could both see its miniature screen. Once he was seated, he scrolled back through the text discussion pane to catch up on what had been going on, and was relieved to discover that the members of Project Iris and the newsgroup posters were getting to know one another.

"It's a good thing this meeting software defaults to open discussion," he said. "If it had started in presentation mode, they wouldn't have been able to do anything until I gave someone the floor."

Sid pointed at the handful of participant icons stacked up along the right side of the screen. "So if your group's all in Seattle, why'd they ask you to moderate it?"

He shrugged. "Because that's what I do. Besides, my friend Ronnie Kovak — the guy who called the meeting — just became the de facto leader after the woman who founded the project got Burnout Fever."

While they talked, the number of participant icons signaling for attention dropped to one, Ronnie's. Barry typed a few words, and then handed the meeting over to him. A few seconds later, the wide eyes of a happy teenager replaced the meeting service's logo in the presentation pane. He scrolled the picture, revealing the words 'Project Iris' superimposed below her angelic face. Soon, text began to roll up the discussion pane.

"This is Ronnie Kovak. Project Iris has confirmed the hypothesis first proposed by members of the BF newsgroup, and the team wanted to present its findings to you before showing it to the CDC later today. Unfortunately, as most of you already know, Leslie Omak is no longer able to lead the effort, but our report to the CDC will still be presented under her name."

There was a pause, and then a chart replaced Iris's picture. While Barry scrolled around to bring other portions of the image into view, the text resumed.

"Our formal report has a number of background charts leading up to this one, but we'd like to get right to the meat of it right now. This picture tells the whole story, though."

Sid asked for control of the pointer, and turned the palmtop slightly for a closer look. It was a scatter chart, with colored data points plotted on a grid, and three lines drawn through clusters of points. Along the bottom of the chart was an erratic black line that connected all of the points plotted. Above it was a green line and then a red one, each with a wider scattering of points. The top group however, had far fewer points along it than middle one.

"As you know, our team's focus has been on the physical manifestations of the changes in mental function. The data shown here represents the length of time it takes various people to respond to an auditory stimulus that suggests how to interpret an ambiguous image, and to take an action based on that interpretation."

After scrolling the image back to a central area that showed a scattering of points, Sid turned the palmtop towards Barry. "He's probably right, but I think there may be some more information lurking in the data."

"The black trace represents a control group of people without BF. The red trace represents patients tested within three days of onset, and the green one represents the same patients after two weeks. As you can see, the control group all respond much more quickly than either test of the BF patients. One of our most interesting results was that some patients were unable to resolve the ambiguity at all, even with additional hints. These people have not been able to handle even the simplest instructions, and must be cared for at complete care facilities."

Almost immediately, several of the participants' icons changed color, indicating that they wanted to say something. Barry typed a message to Ronnie in a separate pane, and then changed the meeting mode to open forum.

The two men were intently watching the ensuing discussion, trying to keep up with all of the comments from both groups, when a sharp knock at the door broke the silence. As Barry rose to see who it was, Sid put his hands over the keyboard and started typing.

A woman wearing a severe business suit and carrying a black attaché case held up the identification card in her free hand. "Mr. Lieber? I'm Pricilla Karnoy from the State Department. Do you have a few minutes?"

He stared at her in confusion and took the card. "The State Department? How did you even know I was here?"

"May I come in?"

"Sure, I suppose, but what do you want with me?"

As the door swung shut behind him, Barry stood looking at Karnoy, waiting for an answer. Sid stopped typing and watched from the kitchen.

"I know that your security clearance has lapsed, but we need to know that you will honor the obligations it implies anyway."

He shrugged. "Sure. What's this about?"

"The death of Secretary Guillen was just the tip of the iceberg. We need all the licensed negotiators we can find, and we need them fast. The State Department is organizing a team of negotiators to help straighten out the problems that have been caused by the loss of far too many people in the Department to Burnout Fever. Many of the international agreements that have been worked out in the past few months have come under scrutiny as a result of this, and our partners are demanding a re-examination or a re-negotiation with certified personnel before acting on those agreements. In some cases, this action means preventing war."

Sid stepped into the living room. "Certified as what?"

She looked at him. "Who are you?"

"Selwyn Donahue, and my clearance is still in force. Certified as what?"

"As not having Burnout Fever. But according to the CDC, there's no way to be certain."

Barry nodded. "Well there is now. The research team we're meeting with right now is about to report their findings to the CDC. So what's the emergency, and how did you find me?"

Karnoy put her case down and smiled broadly. "That was easy. Between your asking for advice from SeaTac Traffic Control, having the ticket agent bump you to First Class, and then calming the dispute over the flight attendant en route, enough people were alerted to your travel plans that we didn't even have to do a search. As to the emergency, Secretary Guillen was returning from negotiations in the Middle East when his plane crashed. Several governments misinterpreted the air component of one of Defense's long-planned war games in that region, and it managed to spin out of control. They each assumed that we were taking some unilateral action against them, and threatened retaliation with weapons systems that they are no longer able to maintain."

"What kind of weapons systems?"

"All kinds. Nuclear. Chemical. Biological. Even by countries that we didn't think had any."

"So your intelligence is suspect as well."

"Of course. They're not immune from this thing either."

Barry eyed her suspiciously. "I've heard rumors that Guillen may have had Burnout Fever himself."

Sid stared in disbelief.

She glanced at the floor and frowned. "Yeah. He did."

He thought for a moment. "And that he might not have been aboard that plane when it crashed."

"Who told you that?"

"Sorry, but I can't tell you. Is it true?"

Karnoy chuckled. "Touché. Neither can I. So can we count on you?"

Barry took a long breath before answering. "Yeah. When do we leave?"

"Now."

Sid nodded. "It's okay. I've used that software before. I'll manage the meeting for you, and set the lock when I leave."

"All right. Just don't frighten Derek if he gets back before you go."

Chapter FORTY-FIVE

Ding-dong.

Arthur Fox looked up from the State Department brief spread out in the middle of the dining room table, and smiled. He'd invited Lilly for dinner, and populated his favorite placemats — the blue and white tufted ones from the ski resort where they'd met — with a random set of mismatched plates and flatware, at the ends of the table.

With all of the confusion surrounding the domestic effects of what the media had dubbed "Rice's Rebellion", the fact that the world had so far managed to not blow itself up had escaped most people's notice. But then, most people didn't know half of what he did about the situation. One document alone listed all of the challenged negotiations that the State Department was scrambling to confirm, highlighting the contentious details in each one. Unlike other members of the House Intelligence Committee, however, he not only had access to what the various federal agencies were willing to disclose, but also to the very different class of insights and information circulating in the activist community that Melissa and her friends inhabited.

He hastily straightened the papers, slid them back into their ribbon-tie folder, and opened his case to put them away for the night. As he snapped it shut, he glanced uneasily at the eclectic dinnerware flanking him, and realized that he'd made a mistake: in her current state, Lilly would be more at ease eating from a matched set. He scooped up the place settings and rushed into the kitchen, grabbed the case on his way back, set it down beside the couch, and ended up, breathless, at the door.

The bell had just started ringing again when he turned the handle to let her in. He hadn't felt this nervous around her since she first turned up in DC, and it showed.

She smiled serenely for a few seconds. "Like I told you, Arthur, I have everything under control."

He nodded, and watched her cab drive off. "I should know better than to doubt you, Lilly. Ever. Come on in. Dinner's nearly ready."

She sniffed the air a few times while he hung up her coat, and glanced towards the kitchen. "Is that your famous tarragon sauce I smell? I hope you made enough this time."

"Plenty. You can even drown your salad with it if you want."

Lilly looked at him curiously. "Why would I want to do that? The chicken and onions, of course, and those peppery beans, maybe, but the salad?"

"Never mind," he said as he stepped towards the dining room. "I just meant that I'd made extra this time, so you can have as much as you want."

As she passed the deco doorway, she raised her hand unsteadily and pointed at the empty table. "What happened? You always lay out the china before starting to cook."

"I, um," he stalled, "I was busy. Make yourself comfortable in the living room, and I'll take care of it."

She waved him off. "No, thanks. I'm as much family as guest around here. I'll do it. You go check on the sauce. Wouldn't want to let it get burnt, you know."

While Lilly opened the china cabinet and busied herself, Fox hid the two mixed place settings in the microwave, and turned to stir the sauce.

"Where are those placemats you like so much?" she asked. "I've looked through the drawer, and they're missing."

"They're, um... in the laundry," he lied. "I spilled something on them. So pick something else."

"Okay." She shrugged amiably and turned around.

Fox sighed in relief, and got the chilled Caesar salad from the refrigerator. She'd selected rust-colored octagonal placemats, and was arranging two sets of matching lustreware dishes on them when he entered, so he walked around the table and set the crystal bowl down across from them, making an orderly isosceles triangle with the mats.

“So tell me,” he said as he pushed her seat in, mindful of the need for both formal structure and contextual hints, “who’s this assistant I hear you’ve hired, the one who’s helping you with context problems?”

“Chloe? She was already on my staff. I just asked her to take a different position, that’s all. It was Elena’s idea, you know.”

He ground some pepper over their salads while considering his next question. “As I understand it, she’ll be doing something like what Elena did to help you during the senate hearing you testified at. Is that correct?”

Lilly smiled contentedly. “That’s right. I like Elena. She’s so nice, but I haven’t seen her all week.”

Worried that the discussion was about to go on walkabout, he ate a few forkfuls and then tried guiding it back on track. “She flew to Atlanta last weekend and held a press conference. So tell me, how is Chloe working out?”

“It was a bit rough at first. There are always so many things going on at once down at the office and in the meetings. She was afraid to speak up at first, but she soon got over it. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

The conversation was awkward at first, too, but by the time they got to the chicken and onions, and Lilly had a taste of the tarragon sauce, it was smooth sailing. That was when the phone rang, and they hit a monsoon.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” she asked after the fourth ring.

He finished his tea and shrugged. “The machine can get it. This evening is just for us.” But after the beep sounded, he changed his mind.

“Arthur, this is Elena.”

They looked at one another. She sounded upset about something.

“I hope you’re there, because you’re going to want to know about this.”

He got up so quickly that the chair nearly tipped over, and dashed for the handset by the couch. “Yeah, I’m here. What’s wrong?”

While Fox stood there, listening, Lilly picked up his empty goblet and walked into the kitchen. He grabbed the remote, clicked the TV on, and tuned to the cable news channel. The anchor’s commentary about transferring to a remote feed from New York City for a press conference at the UN hid the gentle whoosh of the open refrigerator and the gurgle of water being poured, but not Lilly’s scream or the crash of shattered glass that followed.

He dropped the phone and ran.

She stood there, her mouth agape, fingers splayed and her back arched in fear, in front of the open microwave, a look of intense confusion on her face. “The...?”

“What is it, Lilly? What’s the matter?”

She shook her head jerkily and pointed at the stack of dishes and silverware sitting on the place mats she’d been looking for earlier. “...laundry?”

When he realized what had happened, he guided her into the living room and sat beside her on the couch. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to... I didn’t want to frighten you... I was afraid that...”

Frustrated with himself, Fox scooped up the phone, said a few annoyed words to Elena, and clicked it off. While he comforted Lilly, the picture changed to a spotlight podium in Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, outside the United Nations Building, where a silver haired man waited patiently for his lengthy introduction to be finished. According to the on-screen caption, it was renowned UN futurist Myamar Hounté.

With his attention split between the statement that Dr. Morales had told him to expect and his emotional need to help Lilly regain her sense of control over a world that, from her perspective, had probably gone stark, raving mad, Fox struggled to keep his own sense of balance. Hiding the dishes in the microwave might have been an acceptable emergency move from his point of view, but under the circumstances, and from Lilly’s point of view, it was clearly a disaster waiting to happen. The cognitive dissonance he’d unintentionally set up might have seemed funny to anyone else, but to someone with Burnout Fever it was nothing more than a cruel joke. He only hoped that she’d eventually forgive him for it.

Hounté had started talking while Fox was busy soothing Lilly, and he rocked her gently while listening to the man’s deep, French-accented baritone.

“...and we have discussed the effects of this disease on the peoples in different parts of the world, both those directly dependent on technology, and

those who are not so blessed. That it may be cured, given enough time and resources, is not at issue. Of that, we are in total agreement. However, one thing that has emerged from those talks is a prospect that we cannot ignore.”

Hounté clutched the edge of the podium, the stress in his fingers reflecting the intensity in his voice.

“Regardless of whether a person is directly dependent on the continued existence of the technology prevalent in developed nations or not, the world as a whole has become dependent upon it. International trade is founded upon it, the economic and political stability of the planet is addicted to it, and the UN Futures Conference unanimously agrees that without it, we will face a catastrophe of global proportions. For these reasons, we implore the governments of the world to act now, and in concert, to avert disaster. If this is not done, be assured that before many more weeks have passed, national governments will collapse, and the transnational corporations that flout them will become extinct.”

He scanned the crowd behind the camera and focused his gaze on some unseen person.

“Here in New York City, as elsewhere, the enforcement of civil order will fail, and a large portion of the planet will be laid waste through the foolish use of heinous weapons, weapons used in blind anger without regard for the consequences of their use. This week’s revolt by several governors of US states has already sparked similar conflicts around the world. It cannot be allowed to continue.”

Hounté continued quietly, but that only made it seem more ominous. “Burnout Fever may seem a trivial matter, for it is not obvious how important the ability it robs us of is to every aspect of life. The building I stand before today is proof of that value, for without the ability to change the context of our thoughts, we cannot place ourselves in the shoes of another, cannot understand his concerns or know his fears, and in the end, cannot recognize that he is no different from ourselves.”

He paused and looked directly into the camera. “We therefore implore all of the nations of the world to put aside their differences, to postpone indefinitely any conflicts that may be underway, or that may have been caused by miscommunication through the loss of envoys, diplomats and other officials to this plague called Burnout Fever. A unified response to this situation must be crafted, and that response must be implemented before there are not enough unaffected people left to carry it out. Failure to do so will most certainly toll the death knell for mankind.”

Lilly peered at the screen for a moment, and then looked at Fox. “I didn’t follow all that. What did he say?”

Chapter Forty-SIX

Melissa Fox cringed at the grating howl of the PA system when she opened the pharmacy door. She glanced at the checkout clerk holding the microphone, an emaciated woman with unkempt hair, who scowled at her customer while demanding that the assistant manager help her with the card scanner. A ragged line of irate customers holding blue plastic shopping baskets snaked past the empty magazine rack beside the lone open checkout, and disappeared into the candy aisle. She returned a few dark stares as she made her way past a malodorous clutter of damp perfume boxes that had fallen from their display, and headed for the prescription counter at the rear of the store.

On her way, she passed two teenage girls arguing loudly over the last box of their favorite

hair color, and glanced at the empty spaces in the normally filled shelves. Finding what you needed at the drug store didn't look like it was much easier than it had been lately at the grocery, the sad state of which she knew all too well from her father's diatribe about locating fresh tarragon for yesterday's dinner with Lilly.

When he called this morning, she expected to be treated to a glowingly ornate description of a wonderful evening, but instead, he launched into a tirade of self-loathing, a merciless drubbing about how his propensity for thinking only of the immediate situation had backfired, frightening the one person he couldn't bear to alienate. Her Aunt Lilly had become so disoriented that she lost much of the progress she'd made in learning how to live with Burnout Fever, and the stress of having hurt her came back to haunt him this morning in the form of a flare of his MS. He wasn't up to going out, so he asked Melissa to pick up a prescription that his doctor had called in.

When she rounded the far end of the long aisle, her pace slackened at the sight of a knot of people waiting to speak with the pharmacist. Most of them were carrying plastic prescription bottles, lifting them from time to time to glance at their labels and then grumble or grit their teeth.

"Is there a problem?" she asked a balding man staring at his prescription bottle.

He looked up at her and sneered. "Yeah. You bet there's a problem. I've been taking this for eight years, and you can believe me when I say that the stuff in this bottle is crap. It doesn't work, and I want a refund."

A rumble of agreement arose from the others. The woman speaking with the pharmacist looked behind her and smiled. "You see?" she told him, "I'm not alone here. And none of us is going to leave until you either replace our pills or refund our money!"

The crowd watched uneasily while the pharmacist straightened and slowly crossed his arms in defiance. He stood for a moment, pursing his lips in thought, the strident tones of a talk radio host balancing the unspoken tension in the crowd from behind the counter. "Look," he told her, "the pills you have are what there is. The manufacturers are having serious problems right now, too. The best I can do is to issue you refunds, but don't expect to find anything better somewhere else. We've been reporting these quality control problems for weeks now, and nothing's changed."

"Fine," she said sharply. "Where do I sign?"

Melissa waited while the rest of the crowd turned in their bottles for store credit, and then approached the counter. "Bad day, huh?"

"The worst. And I don't even work here."

"Burnout Fever?" she asked lightly.

He sighed. "In a way. The Sunday crew carpools. They were broadsided, killed instantly on their way in. So how can I help you?"

"After what I just saw, I'm not so sure you can. My father's doctor called in a prescription for him. His name's Arthur Fox."

"The congressman?"

She nodded.

"Well," he said after a pause, "at least you won't have the same problem that they did."

"You mean you have some, and it's good?"

"Sorry, no. That particular manufacturer has managed to keep their quality up, but I can't get the stuff."

"Why not?"

He looked over her head for a moment. "It's made in St. Paul."

"So?"

"So they fly it out. It's got to be refrigerated, and the company doesn't trust the replacement truckers to get it delivered safely."

"And?"

"Didn't you hear about 'Rice's Rebellion'? They won't let planes from those states land here anymore. It's crazy!"

Melissa was about to say something when the man's phone rang.

"Pharmacy." He answered with a look of faux dread, but his mood quickly brightened. "Oh yeah? When? Thanks."

"What was that?"

He grinned. "It seems your father's in luck."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Apparently, Rice just called off the rebellion. I don't know, maybe that UN guy freaked him. In any case, they'll be screening their airports by tonight. I ought to have that order

filled for you by tomorrow afternoon.”

She closed her eyes briefly, and smiled in relief. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Any time. Now if they could only fix the damn credit card readers.” He tapped the one on the counter. “These things have gotten so flaky lately, there’s not much point in even trying. I haven’t seen so much actual cash change hands in years.” He nodded towards the front of the store. “You’d think they’d post a sign up there. You know, to alert the customers. As it is, they just keep trying to scan the cards, and one by one, the customers end up digging for green. See you later, okay?”

Back in her car, Melissa pulled out her cell phone and called her father. They spoke for several minutes, about the chaos in the pharmacy and about his medicine being delayed, but her mind wasn’t really on that at all. Soon after he answered, she pulled a small pad out of the door pocket and started doodling. By the time they were finished, she had an idea for a new greeting card.

Flipping to a fresh page, she drew two squares. In the first, she roughed out a hand holding a fanned out set of credit cards. Below it, she wrote, ‘I finally found a use for these things.’ In the second one, she drew an oblong container made from the cards, and then added a few circles and lines suggesting a pile of money inside. Below the sketch, she printed, ‘A little plastic glue, and they make a nice cash box!’

She studied it for a few seconds, then closed the pad and tucked it behind her bag on the passenger seat. Smiling with satisfaction, she called Derek and asked if he was going to be home for a while.

“Sure, ‘lissa,” he said happily, “come on by!”

Chapter Forty-SEVEN

“Thanks, Amy. I’d like to chat longer, but we just got company, and I have to wake Barry in a few minutes.” Derek left the handset beside his laptop on the kitchen table, and rose to answer the door.

“Hi Derek,” Melissa said brightly as she leaned in for a kiss.

“I’m happy to see you, too. How’s your father doing?”

She frowned and handed him her jacket. “Don’t ask.” Then, after glancing at the inert lump of manhood on the couch, she added, “What’s up with him? It’s nearly one.”

“Still dragging. He got in around dawn, and he’d forgotten to take his key. By the time I realized the pounding in my dream didn’t really come from the circle of escaped sea nymphs threatening to drown me, the neighbors were out in force. He’s been sleeping ever since.”

She giggled. “Sea nymphs, huh? I think that fountain is really getting to you. So where was Barry all night?”

“That’s what I wanted to know. I asked when I let him in, but he was more interested in finding the bathroom, and when he finally did come out, he was so groggy that I decided to let it drop. I think he made the jump to dreamland before he even hit the couch.”

Derek led her into the kitchen, and poured three cups of coffee. “The black one’s for Barry,” he said as he grabbed two of them. “There’s a webcast coming up that he wanted to see.”

She added cream and sugar to her own cup, and then joined Derek in front of the couch.

“You know,” he said as he knelt and put both cups on the coffee table, “he’s been acting really strange since Tuesday. When I got back here after dropping you off, I found Sid here, holding Barry’s palmtop. He was standing in the middle of the room with a really guilty look on his face. My first thought, of course, was that Ted had been right all along, that Sid really was the ringleader of the black marketers that had stolen our office computer. But then he went into this absurd story about someone from the State Department making off with him.”

“The State Department? Barry? So was it true?”

“How should I know? The few times I’ve seen him since then, he’s refused to say anything about it. I’m really beginning to worry about him.”

Since Barry still hadn't stirred, Derek reached over and flicked his ear a few times. After the third time, he lost his balance getting out of the way of a flurry of arm waves as his friend rolled over to face the wall.

Melissa nudged him aside. "Move. Let me give it a try."

After putting her cup down, she leaned close to his ear and whispered something. Then she turned and smiled at Derek. "Watch."

A few seconds later, he blinked a few times and sat up, yawning. "Oh, hi. It's you. Why do you say that?"

"I don't know for sure. Just call it an educated guess."

Derek peered at her curiously. "What did you tell him?"

"Sorry. That's between him and Melanie."

He stood up. "Whatever. You'd better get moving, buddy. It's nearly one o'clock, time for that webcast Ronnie wanted you to see."

She picked up her coffee and took a sip. "Webcast?"

Barry pushed the blanket aside and wobbled to his feet. "Yeah. It seems that one of McQuarry's old staff took over the helm last week. My friend Ronnie — one of the guys we used to meet for our weekly preacher bashing — said it was pretty interesting, and asked me to take a look."

Derek loaded the site's webcast page while Barry excused himself to get cleaned up. By the time he returned, they'd cleared the couch and set the laptop down on the coffee table so they could all watch in comfort.

"Hey," Barry said when he joined them, "what happened to the old 'flying A'? I don't recall seeing this logo before."

Melissa leaned in for a closer look, and traced some shapes in the air as she examined the crude drawing of what looked like some kind of cup resting on an upturned salad bowl. "Hey, Derek," she said, "that looks a bit like the top of the fountain you've been obsessing over."

Before he'd had a chance to examine the drawing, it was replaced by the off-kilter image of a trim woman with wide brown eyes and shoulder length light brown hair. She must have been preoccupied with something below frame, as she kept glancing between the camera and whatever was in front of her.

"Okay," she said, gazing calmly out of the screen. "If you didn't see last Sunday's webcast, my name is Sheralyn Fornét. I worked with Reverend McQuarry before he contracted Burnout Fever. Since then, I've come to see things in a... somewhat different light. Last time, I spoke about the troubles that Masra — an entity that Reverend McQuarry would have called my Angel — told me about in a dream. Today, I want to tell you how Masra's trouble relates to Burnout Fever."

Derek rolled his eyes. "Oh, great. I hope Malcolm Jeffries isn't watching this."

Fornét reached out of frame for a glass of water. After she set it down, she closed her eyes briefly and took a long, slow breath. "From my point of view, Masra exists in a dream; from hers, I'm the dream. She says this is how our realities relate to one another. I spoke with her some more this past week, and she told me that when someone in our world gets Burnout Fever, someone in hers loses their connection to one of their dream selves."

Melissa pursed her lips around the word 'dream', her gaze momentarily lost in the middle distance.

"According to Masra," Fornét continued, "our dreams exist in a kind of pseudo reality. Well, most of them, anyway. We have one dream at a time, and while we're in them, they're as real to us as anything in our waking world. The rules may be different, of course, and we may seem to be someone else, but most of them are private experiences that only exist while we're dreaming them."

She smiled. "But they're really just a kind of play. She says that we use our dreams to teach ourselves how to actually create reality. In time, we learn how to

re-enter them and continue where we left off. Doing this in our own dreams is an important step towards being able to enter a dream created by someone else. The sprawling library complex that I spoke of last week, which is where I met Masra, is a created reality that people can send their dream selves to continue with their studies.”

Barry shrugged. “So? What’s that got to do with Burnout Fever?”

“For people in Masra’s world, as I said, we are the dreams. But we all share a common waking reality, one that, according to her, was simply dreamed into existence. So in a way, there’s no real difference between the world we live in, and the Library: both of them were created, and dream selves inhabit both of them.

“Here’s where we get to the connection to Burnout Fever.”

“Well, finally!” Barry exclaimed happily.

Fornét dropped her gaze in thought for a moment. “There’s a relationship between the dreamer and the dream self, a sharing of love and understanding. People have visualized this connection as a silvery cord, and experienced it as the feeling that someone was watching over them. Reverend McQuarry called the dreamer an Angel. Some people call it God. But regardless of whether you think of it as a benevolent caretaker, an omniscient presence, or even the spirit of the cosmos, one thing remains constant, that the dreamer cares about the dream self, and does what it can to keep it safe.

“Burnout Fever is how people in our world experience the failure of that connection. People in Masra’s world experience it as the sudden disappearance of a part of themselves that they had dreamed into our world as a baby, a part of themselves that they had watched over and worried about, and that they had great hopes for. To them, losing that dream self is like having a piece of your personality suddenly chopped off, like instantly forgetting everything you ever knew about your child, even that you had one.”

Melissa sucked in her breath. “I dreamed that.”

Derek snapped towards her. “The spider?”

“Yeah. It was like I was one of these entities, and the lives at the ends of my threads were Masra’s dream selves. But then the webs started snapping...”

Fornét swallowed the last of her water, but still clutched the glass as if it were her only hope of survival. “When someone in Masra’s world loses enough of their dream selves to Burnout Fever, their sense of self gets so fragmented that they also lose their ability to remain in the created world that they live in. They disappear entirely, as if the being who had in turn dreamed them had been shocked awake.”

She looked at the empty glass in her hand. “The whole idea gives me a headache, but she swears that it’s the truth. Anyway, the people in Masra’s world are being hurt just as much as those in our own world by whatever causes this disease. She’s frightened, they’re all frightened, that if enough of them disappear, their shared dream world will vanish, and take ours with it.”

Barry stared at the screen. “Melanie’s sketches; the deteriorating Angels. But then who’s the guy in the reflection?”

“Before I go,” Fornét said, reaching out of frame to put the glass down, “I want to share a vision I had when I left the library. I tried to sketch part of it — I put it up at the beginning, instead of the logo — but I’m no artist.”

Melissa grabbed her pad and pencil.

"I was facing a figure made of flame. Behind it, there was a curving wall. To my left and right, I saw other flaming figures, and they all looked worried, they all seemed to be reaching towards me. Then I floated up, above the wall and past the figure nearest me. When I was right over it, I looked down and noticed that it was attached to the wall by a shining, snaking flow of energy.

"Now that I could see it better, I realized that the wall actually made a circle, and I counted twelve flaming figures surrounding it. Inside the circle of wall was what looked like a reflecting pool. The ripples looked strange though. Instead of making a neat circle around the central island, they seemed to be separated into sections like the split of a grapefruit, with some kind of line connecting each of the figures to the island. The ripples inside each grapefruit section were backwards, too. They were further out along the connecting lines, than they were between them, almost like the threads of a spider web."

Melissa sketched furiously.

"As I approached the central island, I found myself amused to discover that it looked like a fancy goblet perched on an upturned salad bowl. The bowl had a rough surface, but regular and in tiers, almost like roofing tile. And the goblet had a fringed edge, with alternating high and low sections. But there was something else: there was a glow coming from whatever was inside the goblet, a colorful dance of light reflecting off the corners. So I drifted higher still, until I could look inside."

Derek shook his head in disbelief. "Bartholdi Fountain?"

"Inside the goblet was a mass of what looked like colored gems, jellybean embers in a cosmic fire. And just before I woke up, I swear I could see something looking out at me through the glow, an infinitely sad set of eyes that struck me at the time as belonging to someone who was powerless to reach through from wherever it might have been."

Fornét sat very still for a while, breathing heavily and blinking uncomfortably. "I don't know what it all might mean, but I hope that one of you does, and I hope that whatever it does mean, it can help to stop the spread of Burnout Fever before our whole world bursts like a soap bubble and we all vanish into the mist.

She took a breath and grew sadly serious. "I'm afraid that this will be my final webcast. The contract for the equipment ends in a few days. Goodbye, and good luck. Perhaps I'll see you in someone's dream."

Chapter Forty-EIGHT

Melissa lowered her sketchbook so she could see the fountain again. Bartholdi's cast iron sculpture stood in the middle of a circular pool beyond the split in the Botanical Garden's walkway. Barry and Derek had each taken one of the paths while she hung back to take in the view. Satisfied that the proportions in her sketch matched those of the fountain, she followed Derek to the concrete rim that surrounded the pool.

"So this is what you've been obsessing about," Barry said, his gaze drifting upwards from the turtles on the pedestal, past the shapely sea nymphs supporting the upper, light-ringed basin, and the young tritons above it, and finally to the crenellated crown that Fornét had described as a goblet on an upturned salad bowl.

"Yup. That's it," Derek replied matter-of-factly. "But I doubt that Bartholdi had Masra's entities in mind when he designed the thing. More likely, he was tripping on the Masonic symbology he was steeped in, and just wanted to make a few bucks on the copies he tried to sell."

Barry turned to watch Melissa stop beside his friend. "Maybe so. But even if he didn't, that's not to say that it can't be interpreted that way. Attribution is nine-tenths of the lore, you know."

Melissa looked at him in puzzlement.

He took a few steps towards them and smiled. "Didn't Derek tell you I was Pagan?"

Derek chuckled. "And that you take the craft of fabricating rituals to a high art? No, not really. I didn't think it mattered."

"Well, it does." She glanced at Derek, and then approached Barry. "In a way," she said, nodding towards the sculpture, "this thing puts it all in perspective."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I mean, think about it." She was now between them, bisecting the triangle of garden that lay between the paths they'd taken. "Granted, we don't know what Bartholdi may have been thinking when he designed it, but he provided a wealth of raw material for others to interpret. So, in a way, he crafted a dream in iron, and the rest of us are free to step inside and look around, to decide for ourselves what it means to us."

Barry and Derek both drew closer.

She pointed to the bottom of the sculpture. "Take those turtles, for example. I think the fact that they're at the base is the key to understanding the rest of it."

"The turtles?" Derek asked, incredulously.

"Yes, the turtles. For the Lakota, the turtle represents the Creating Power; to the Greeks and Romans, it represented fertility; and they've often been depicted as supporting all of creation. So I'm pretty comfortable with interpreting the sculpture as an image of creation."

Barry pointed a bit higher up the sculpture. "So what about the shells, then?"

She studied them briefly. "Well, since there's a platform between the turtles and the main part of the sculpture, I'd guess that this is where the creation supported by the turtles really starts. Notice that the sea nymphs are standing on a base of not only shells, though, but of fish and coral as well, all products of the sea, from which all life emerged."

Derek crossed his arms. "So why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"You never asked. Anyway, the three sea nymphs would represent the life that emerged into the reality supported by the turtles. They're standing on the sea, with their arms raised to hold up the sky, which I think means—"

Barry picked up the thought. "—that Bartholdi is suggesting there are different levels of reality."

She grinned. "Okay, smart guy. What about the basin and the lights?"

"Oh, that one's easy. If the nymphs are holding up the basin of the sky, then the twelve lights have to be the twelve constellations in the zodiac."

Derek looked up at the electric lights ringing the basin. "I read that this thing was originally plumbed for gas."

"Sure," Barry said without missing a beat. "Cosmic fire, like in Fornét's vision."

"And people's lives in my dream," Melissa added. "But where does it go from there?"

Derek raised a finger. "Hold on a minute. If her fire figures and your thread lives are the same thing, then the basin could also represent the circle of one of Masra's entities, couldn't it?"

She nodded. "Okay, I'll buy that."

"In that case," Barry said slowly, "someone getting BF would be like breaking off one of the lights. But now, don't we have a confusion of symbology?"

"Depends. Maybe that was the point."

Derek shook his head. "What point? Where are you going with this?"

Barry glanced at his watch. "Wherever it is, we'll have to finish this another time. I'm late for my appointment. When Sid asked me to meet him there, he didn't say what he'd pulled out of the data he was analyzing. Come on, let's get going."

Chapter FORTY-NINE

"Welcome to the CDC, Mr. Lieber. I'm glad you could make it. I'm Ezra Silas, head of the DC Burnout Fever team. The others are waiting upstairs."

"Thanks." As they shook hands, Barry wondered if a man with Silas' build would have been more at home tracking down escaped felons than isolating the cause of Burnout Fever, but he knew it was never a good idea to judge a person by their genes.

"So who are your friends?"

"Oh, sorry. Derek Boa is one of the principals of a group called Constitutional Evolution, and Melissa Fox is, well, maybe she should tell you herself."

She jabbed him in the ribs. "I'm an artist, but we both have an interest in Burnout Fever. Mind if we sit in?"

He smiled. "No, not at all. If there's one thing I've learned from being on this project, it's that you can never tell where the next lucky break might come from."

Once they were all issued visitor badges, they took the elevator upstairs and Silas led them into a dimly lit conference room. As soon as Barry turned towards an empty seat, Melissa, who was right behind him, broke into a broad grin.

"Elena!" she said happily. "What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I should ask you the same question. Dare I call you 'cupcake'?"

"Actually, I'm glad you reminded me about that. I think I finally know why I pulled that stunt."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. And I think it has something to do with why we're all here today."

Ignoring Dr. Morales' confused expression, she took a seat and looked around the room. Barry was speaking quietly with Sid, and Derek was exchanging business cards with Silas. When they were finished, Silas stepped to the end of the table and waited for everyone to get settled.

"It seems that most of you already know each other, which puts me at a bit of a disadvantage. So before we get started, could someone please connect the dots for me?"

Derek spoke first. "Sure. Let's see, now. Barry and I were roommates in college, so we keep in touch." He glanced at Barry.

"So, when my wife got Burnout Fever a few months ago, I called Derek."

"I was at a meeting of Constitutional Evolution at the time. Anyway I put him onto the UseNet newsgroup that was discussing BF. Your turn."

"Well, when Leslie Omak set up Project Iris, an unofficial CDC field team at the University of Washington, she noticed my posts and asked me to help out. That led to my wife becoming involved as well."

"I think I'm next," Melissa said suddenly. "My father is Congressman Fox, and he's had this thing for Lillian Haekson for years. Anyway, after my Aunt Lilly was elected to Congress, he ended up on a committee she chairs. Elena?"

"I was testifying in her committee the day she contracted Burnout Fever. I decided to stay for a while to observe, and ended up becoming part of their extended family. Who's next?"

Barry and Derek looked at one another for a moment. Barry laughed, and said, "Your serve."

"I spoke to a reporter named Amy Gratham after a nasty Senate hearing on the effects of Burnout Fever. She'd been piecing together bits of BF-related news that never made the papers, and decided that things were worse than anyone was willing to admit. She felt that a coalition of grassroots groups would be instrumental in salvaging the situation. I knew the only way that could happen would be if we had a good negotiator, so I asked Barry to fly here from Seattle."

Sid didn't wait for an opening. "And that's when they ran into me. I was beating on one of the GMU student admins about professors with Burnout Fever going invisible, when they interceded and offered to help us find a solution to present to the administration."

"I'll bat cleanup," Barry said, amused. "I was mediating a web meeting between Project Iris and the UseNet group, when Sid dropped by to tell me about a data mining idea he had, and I guess that's why we're here. Does that help?"

Silas broke up. "You guys ought to take up juggling."

Derek studied his friend for a moment. "There is one other thing I'd like cleared up, Barr."

"Oh?"

"Uh huh. Sid told me you'd been abducted by the State Department."

Sid turned his palms up. "But he was!"

“Why? What did they want?”

He feigned innocence. “Negotiators. With Secretary Guillen dead, all hell was breaking loose, and they were too short staffed to handle it. So they recruited.”

“What did you do for them?”

“Nothing much. Talked to a few governors, that’s all.”

“Wait a minute.” His voice went up a few decibels. “You ended Rice’s Rebellion?”

“I helped. Should I have said no?”

Melissa snorted. “Well, I should hope not. If you hadn’t, my Dad wouldn’t be getting his MS meds today.”

Dr. Morales put her hand over Melissa’s. “What happened? Is he all right?”

“My Aunt Lilly had a fright during dinner with him on Saturday. She lost some of the progress she’d made against the effects of Burnout Fever, and he felt so guilty about causing it that he had a flare-up.”

“I’m sorry, dear. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Well, since you’re in town, you might drop by to cheer him up.”

“Sure thing. And how’s Lillian doing?”

“I don’t know. I tried calling yesterday, but she didn’t answer.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Elena. I appreciate it.”

Silas, who had been watching the exchange with interest, stood up and surveyed the gathering. “I guess we ought to get this meeting underway, then. From what I understand, Mr. Donahue submitted his findings to Project Iris in Seattle because that was the team Mr. Lieber introduced him to. Their de facto leader, who I understand is a friend of Mr. Lieber, then forwarded the information to Atlanta. Dr. Morales immediately requested a meeting, and flew in this morning to attend. The floor is yours, Mr. Donahue.”

Sid waited for Silas to resume his seat before speaking. “I have a personal interest in the spread of Burnout Fever, due to my work in the Computational Dynamics Lab at George Mason University. When I learned that the epidemiological data didn’t match any rational pattern of spread based on the universe of known disease vectors, I decided to take a different approach to the problem. I looked for a model that explained the data first, and didn’t worry about how to explain the model.”

He looked at Barry. “My original idea was to start from the assumption that the paths of contagion through the human web behaved like any other scale-free network, so I used the Internet as a stand-in. Since my objective was to develop a model that fit the behavior of the data, I didn’t worry about trying to map it to actual events. Anyway, as you probably know, there have been two distinct patterns of spread. The first one covers individual cases, and can be explained through conventional vectors of contact between people and among groups. The second pattern are the groups of cases that are triggered simultaneously, yet don’t appear to be connected except by when they occur.”

Dr. Morales nodded in agreement. “That’s what had the analysts back in Atlanta stumped. What did you find?”

“Well,” he said, and paused to look uncomfortably at the others, “the group effect can be explained by the failure of a node in that network.”

Melissa frowned. “A node?”

“Yes. Think of the network’s connections like the links between people, and the nodes as the people themselves. When a node fails, it’s like a person being removed from the web; the loss affects everyone they know. In my model, that signified a case of Burnout Fever.”

“Does that mean,” Barry said slowly, “that you’re suggesting we assume the existence of two different scale-free networks, two different webs? One for the conventional cases, and the other for the groups?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, if the first one represents the physical disease vectors, what does the second one represent?”

“I’m not really sure. Hypothetically, there could be some sort of phantom connection between people who neither know one another, nor have any physical or proximate contact. Like if we had one case in this world, and the other in, well, I don’t really know.”

Barry, Derek and Melissa looked at one another uncomfortably for a moment.

When nobody spoke, Silas said, “Is there something you three want to say?”

Barry turned slowly to look at him. "Well..."

"I don't know," Derek hazarded. "How do we...?"

Melissa shook her head. "Look, you two, are you going to say something or not?"

Derek pointed to her pad, which she was idly strumming with her thumb. "You've got the picture. Why don't you try?"

Morales looked at her. "So what is it, then?"

She opened the pad, flipped to her sketch of Masra's vision, and slid it towards Morales.

"Remember McQuarry?"

Sid snorted. "The idiot preacher that demonized Burnout Fever?"

"Yeah, him. One of his staff did a webcast yesterday. I don't know if there's any validity to what she said, but the three of us have been discussing it, and I think it might shed some light on all of this."

"Well, are you going to get to the point?"

She clenched her jaw and drew a breath. "Her name is Fornét. She says that McQuarry's angels are really just entities living in another reality, and that to them, we're basically dreams."

"I thought you said this might actually be useful."

She shot him a withering glance before continuing. "As I was saying, according to Fornét, each of these entities keeps a lot of dreams in play at once."

Silas chuckled. "Like juggling."

"Yes. She also said that when someone here gets Burnout Fever, someone there loses contact with one of their dreams. But more importantly, if enough of those dreams are lost, the entity drops out of the game, taking the rest of the dreams with it."

Sid raised both hands. "Wait a minute. So you're suggesting that these entities are the glue holding those groups of simultaneous cases together?"

She nodded. "It's one explanation. Do you have a better idea?"

Morales studied Melissa for a moment. "You're serious?"

"Very. In fact, I have a hunch that I've known about it all of my life. I think the cupcake incident was a demonstration."

Silas looked dubious. "The what?"

"Not important. It's just that the three of us have been comparing notes, and we've each encountered some related symbolism recently." She tapped the sketch. "This is my take on a vision that Fornét described in her webcast, and it seems to make some sort of sense."

He slid it closer for a better look. "What is it?"

"A lot of things. To me, it explains a dream about being a spider. To Derek, it's a translation of Bartholdi Fountain. To Barry, it's an explanation of his wife's obsession with Angels. But the point is that if there is anything to there being another kind of network that explains the group burnouts, then maybe we can use that as a starting point. Maybe we can use it to figure out what to do."

"All right," Sid said calmly. "Let's assume for the moment that this is the basis for my hypothetical second network. Where does that get us? What do we know about these entities, assuming that they even exist?"

Derek shrugged. "Well, if they're conscious beings, then they probably have interests. So there might be something we haven't considered that's held in common by the groups of simultaneous cases. I don't know. Maybe they all have an interest in Etruscan literature, or they're allergic to chocolate. Anything. At least it's something to look for. If the CDC analysts are stumped as it is, then what's the harm?"

Morales sat back. "All right, but I can't imagine how you're going to collect the kind of data you'd need. You just said that it could be anything. We can't know everything about each person who's gotten Burnout fever. It's an impossible task!"

"Wait a minute," Barry said suddenly. "I think you're all missing an important point."

An expectant silence filled the room as one by one, the others fixed their gaze on him and waited for him to drop the other shoe.

"Fornét's entities are only one explanation for this phantom network. I suppose you could call it a religion or a philosophy, though, which begs the question about all the others out there. Shouldn't we consider the possibility that there might be a basis for this model in other systems as well? I mean, even if you stay with the theme of angels, there's a wealth of mythology out there. Who's to say that just because there's something to this hypothetical network, it has to fit Fornét's explanation? Maybe we should at least talk with people who subscribe to other views as well."

Silas stood and slowly walked towards the far wall, his arms crossed in thought. Then he turned around and shook his head. "I don't buy it. If you did, what would you talk about? How would you proceed? What's your objective?"

"I suppose the first thing would be to collect all of the equivalent bits of metaphysics, whether they come from a religious or a philosophical source. That at least would give us a universe of possible phantom networks to consider."

"But..." Morales grimaced. "That sets us up for having to declare which of them is the so-called 'truth', doesn't it? We can't do that. This is science, after all."

Melissa grinned mischievously. "Maybe not."

They all looked at her and waited.

"When we were discussing the symbolism in Bartholdi Fountain, we reached a point where there seemed to have been a bifurcation, a split in the metaphor, so to speak. I think we've just reached the same point in our discussion. It might be that in order to understand this completely, we'd have to hold both a scientific and a metaphoric worldview at the same time. The underlying reality might not be either one."

Sid looked puzzled, and started drumming his fingers. "You mean like waves and particles? The answers we get are based on the kind of question we ask?"

"Essentially, yes." She turned to Barry. "What was that you said about attribution earlier?"

"That it's nine-tenths of the lore. Yeah. I suppose you're right. If the world is ambiguous enough to attribute all sorts of symbolism to it, then it ought to be ambiguous enough to attribute both a scientific and a philosophic explanation as well. I have no problem with that, but you can bet a lot of other people will."

Morales nodded slowly. "If we do this, it's definitely going to have to be on our own. The CDC can't get its fingers into that kind of constitutional quagmire."

"Then you agree?"

She shrugged. "I'm a scientist, and this is a working hypothesis: a truly bizarre one, but a working hypothesis nonetheless. So, how do we pull this off?"

Derek leaned forward conspiratorially. "Just like any other revolution: on the sly. We start by compiling a list of invitees, representatives of as many religious and philosophical systems as we can find, and invite them all to an impromptu discussion about the fate of the world."

Barry chuckled. "You're definitely going to need a mediator."

"You're hired!"

Sid stopped drumming his fingers. "Hold on, Derek. Not so fast. That's bound to be a pretty large and argumentative group."

"So?"

"It'll take forever to get them to agree on anything, even using the exploratory process you showed us."

"Possibly. Do you have a better idea?"

"I think so. What if we invited people who've already done some of the synthesis; people who may have already thought through some of the things we'll need to talk about? Instead of a crowd of religious and philosophical leaders, how about just tapping a few people with a deep understanding of religion and philosophy? Maybe a couple of the pros from GMU?"

"Sounds workable. What do the rest of you think?"

Melissa cocked her head briefly. "Well, I kind of think it might be helpful to have Sheralyn Fornét involved in this as well."

Morales laid her phone on the table. "All right. Who else should I call?"

"Ted, of course," Sid said, amused with the turn of events. "He knows which ones haven't gone BF. I'll get you his number."

Silas shook his head and sighed.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering why you all needed me."

"Don't be silly," Melanie chided him, "you're why we're here!"

Chapter FIFTY

Sheralyn Fornét reluctantly dragged her gaze from the woods outside the window of her office in Reverend McQuarry's Shasta Lake Commune, and sighed. The community was deserted now, except for her and her companion through all the turmoil, a water-damaged print of Carlos Schwabe's symbolist masterpiece, "Death of the Gravedigger." She stood in the doorway of her tiny refuge, leaning against the jamb, and wondered where she could go, now that the property had been sold to developers and the place she'd called home these past six years would soon be scrapped to make way for holiday condos.

The echoing drip of a faucet down the hallway lulled her into a melancholy trance, reminding her as it did of the hollowly echoing footsteps through the halls of the Louvre the fateful summer when she was fifteen, the sticky week when she first met her grandfather, when he introduced her to Schwabe, and to the painting with her face.

She stared at the print until the water damage that marred the angel's green wing receded behind her memory of the original, and she fell into reverie, once more lost in the ambiguous mystery of what the artist was thinking when he painted his wife's face on that kneeling figure. She imagined what the scene might have looked like to the wizened gravedigger himself, looking up from the hole he'd dug, past the green flame dancing in her open palm, and into her serene, fire-lit face. She'd often supposed that he was surprised at the sight, if only because of his splayed fingers and the fact that he'd released the handle of his shovel. But then she'd wonder if that release was symbolic of a greater one that she was offering with the heavenward gesture of her other hand.

Fornét felt much like she imagined the gravedigger might have, standing there at the junction of death and release, transfixed by the utter beauty of the moment, while still standing deeply in the pit of his own undoing. Should he go with her? Was she even real? If the green robed angel had not been kneeling at the edge of his pit, the scene might have been one of despair, of an old man at the end of his days, in an open grave overhung by strands of willow, a rocky contrast to the snow-covered grounds of an utterly realistic country graveyard. Were it not for the angel, his stricken look and loosened grip might have signaled something as mundane as a sudden heart attack, rather than the awe that she preferred to believe.

Her focus had closed to the green flame at the painting's heart when she was shaken alert by the sudden jangle of a telephone. It took a moment for her to return fully to the present, by which time the answering machine had begun unreeling its now-useless message. She picked up the handset, and the recording stopped in mid phrase.

"If you're looking for Reverend—"

"Actually," the accented voice on the other end said lightly, "I was looking for a Sheralyn Fornét."

"Speaking."

"Good. I'm Dr. Elena Morales, from the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We have a problem, and were hoping that you could help us with it."

Chapter FIFTY-ONE

"Ted? Are you coming or not?"

Austed Maliq looked up from the frosty surface of Mason Pond and turned towards Derek. Two days before Thanksgiving wasn't the most convenient time to schedule a meeting, but owing to the importance of the outcome, representatives of all the real stakeholders had agreed to attend. It was nearly ten, and they were due in Mason Hall in a few minutes.

Ted had been a regular fixture in the GMU administration building ever since he took on the job of facilities scheduler to defray the cost of classes, but this would be the first time he was on an even footing with the people he usually served, and it unnerved him. He nodded once in agreement, crossed the roadway, and the two headed for the meeting.

The others were already seated when Ted and Derek entered the small conference room. GMU Administrator Vinod Sukarnos, always a study in public propriety, sat at the head of the table. Flanking him like lieutenants, Amanda Keyes and Stuart Ming, his liaisons for corporate and government relationships, sat like well-tailored library lions, protective of their meal ticket. Student Body President Melvin Sklar, his beard newly trimmed, had taken the seat opposite Sukarnos in a self-defeating play for balance against the administration, unaware that by doing so, he only confirmed his role as subordinate. And finally, unbalanced against the two empty seats across from her, was Orvielle Namidy, the newly appointed head of the Humanities Department, representing the university's teaching staff. He knew them all, but of the five, she looked the most uncomfortable.

Sukarnos looked up at them. "Have a seat, Mr. Maliq. I take it that this is Mr. Boa?"

Derek nodded as he pulled in his chair. "Yes, sir. Beside being a student here, I'm also one of the principals of the group that developed the method used to develop Mr. Maliq's proposal."

Instead of responding to his comment, the administrator gave him a severe look, and then fixed his gaze on Ted. "You said you had a solution to our problem?"

Namidy crossed her arms.

"Yes, sir." He glanced at Derek. "Using a process developed by Mr. Boa's associates, a group of concerned GMU students explored the various problems posed by losses to Burnout Fever to the groups represented by the people around the table. We think we have a way to solve those problems without causing any undue hardship."

"To whom?" she snapped. "So far, the faculty has been bearing the burden of responsibility for this."

"I told you earlier," Sukarnos said in an ominously calm tone, "we're not here to blame anyone. Let him talk."

She fumed in silence.

Ted paused in thought for a moment, and then smiled to himself briefly before continuing. "We started by assessing the situation as it exists, a bifurcation of both the student body and the teaching staff. There's a growing rift between those who have contracted Burnout Fever, and those who have not, and this has implications for everyone here."

"No shit," Sklar grumbled under his breath. He sighed and sat back in his chair.

Sukarnos shook his head in annoyance.

"As I was saying," Ted continued, "we realize that the objective of this, or any other university, is to provide a top-notch education, and to use the resources of the university to benefit our corporate and government partners and underwriters. Yet at the same time, we can't afford to ignore the needs of the students and faculty who get Burnout Fever. And I'm sure that you all agree that we can't afford to sacrifice the quality of GMU's education and research by permitting faculty with Burnout Fever to remain in active roles."

Apprehension filled the room, and he played into it by looking directly at Sukarnos. "If this university chose to service only the dwindling population of students without Burnout Fever, it would face certain economic collapse. That's really the core of the problem, because the existence of a student body makes it possible to employ faculty, and to engage in projects for our corporate and governmental partners. So we began with the assumption that there must be a way to service those who do have Burnout Fever, and to help them to become productive despite their enforced limitations."

Keyes and Ming looked at one another. He'd gotten their attention.

Ted was distracted briefly as several people ran past the window outside on their way to the building's entrance. "It's an obvious avenue for research, with a guaranteed funding stream. The effort would conclude with the establishment of new programs focused on the needs of people with Burnout Fever. Offering them a way to re-integrate into the workforce will ease the employment problems faced by the business community, expand the potential student body, and keep the university solvent."

Sukarnos shrugged. "An admirable objective, Mr. Maliq, but how do you suggest we accomplish it?"

He looked worriedly at Derek and took a long breath. "Well, the first step is to admit to the losses that have already occurred. It's pretty obvious when students get it. They've been dropping out at an alarming rate, a fact that the bursar has been reluctant to confirm."

Sklar laughed humorlessly. "What do you expect them to do?"

"Under the circumstances, it's their only choice. I'm just trying to suggest an alternative." He

shifted his gaze to Namidy. "Faculty members, on the other hand, have been hiding it. This has a number of serious implications that affect not only the students, but the university's corporate and governmental partners as well, and puts a shadow of doubt over any research performed here."

Namidy narrowed her eyes. "Do you think it's easy? Between the crazies accusing people with Burnout Fever of being damned, and this new wave of anonymous press releases identifying all kinds of professionals of concealing the disease, hiding the fact is simple self-defense! Their families have enough to deal with as it is, without adding public scrutiny to their troubles."

Ted splayed his hands on the table. "Tell me something. Do you represent only the tenured faculty, or the entire GMU teaching staff?"

"What?"

"I'm responsible for scheduling replacements for professors and other instructors who are laying low after getting Burnout Fever. Do you also represent the teaching assistants? The grad students that have taken up all the slack?"

"Well, sure, but—"

"Good, because they're critical in salvaging this situation. Tenured staff will have to relinquish that status to make way for replacement—"

"Now just hold on right there," Keyes said sharply.

"You can't do that," Ming added with authority.

"Why not? Because your contracts would be voided? Because your funding is based on their involvement? Think about it. Wouldn't your projects be put at risk by public exposure of the loss of those people? Are you prepared to be charged with fraud, to be the target of endless newspaper exposés. It would be far better to step up the credentialing process and replace them with junior members of their teams, if not by new people brought on for the purpose. The same thing applies to the classrooms. TAs have to be allowed to take over the roles of forcibly retired tenured staff who've gotten Burnout Fever."

Namidy shook her head in derision. "Forcibly retired? Does that include a living pension? What are they going to live on?"

Sukarnos nodded. "It would have to. We can't just put them out on the street. But to afford that, we'd have to maintain full funding for research projects and a robust student body."

Ted smiled. "Then you agree. There's a deep set of dependencies flowing through all this. But if we address the entire problem, it can be solved to everyone's satisfaction. You'll have to act quickly, because students have already started looking for somewhere else to continue their edu—"

There was a loud crack from the hallway, the door flew open, and a wedge of angry people glared at the gathering. At the front was a lean man in a leather jacket.

Derek turned to see what was going on. "Malcolm Jeffries!?"

"Shut up, Boa." He turned to face Sukarnos.

The administrator rose from his seat. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Your guest here just told you my name. What I want is a list, the names of the newly damned faculty, the ones with Damnation Fever."

Derek winced. "Are you still on about that? It's a disease, you—"

He turned toward the interruption. "I said shut up. If it's just a disease, then how come the CDC can't figure it out?"

"You never were very good at science, were you, Malcolm? Just because they don't know what causes it yet doesn't mean it's a sign of divine vengeance."

Sukarnos jabbed his finger at Jeffries. "So you're the one that the press got their leak from! What right have you got to make anonymous accusations that members of our Board of Directors have Burnout Fever?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. We never do anything anonymously. When we root out one of the damned, we want people to know exactly who we are! So hand over that list."

"Not a chance. You'll find out when we tell the press, and not a moment sooner."

"Okay." Jeffries nodded and muttered something to the man beside him, who then turned and left. "If that's the way you want to play this out, I just told my people to lay siege to this building. Nobody goes anywhere until we get what we want. Oh yeah, and I've just raised the price. I demand that your blasphemous research project be terminated immediately, or we'll expose everything!"

Before anyone had a chance to reply, a large man pushed through the crowd, grabbed Jeffries' wrist and pressed him up against the wall with it. "You demand what?"

Jeffries' confederates looked at one another, unsure of what to do.

The man glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry for the interruption, Derek, but I have some news from Atlanta that might be relevant."

Sukarnos threw up his hands in defeat. "All right. It's obvious that we're not going to get this meeting back to order any time soon. So who are you, and what's the news?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Ezra Silas, head of the CDC's field Burnout Fever research team here at GMU. They've decided to fold some of the teams together to cover for losses to the disease we're studying. Since there's already a connection between our group and the one at the University of Washington, they're having the core of Project Iris flown here. The same thing is happening at a lot of other sites."

Silas wrenched Jeffries arm. "Oh, and if you're thinking of disrupting our work, you can forget it. The president just declared Burnout Fever research to be a national priority. The National Guard will be on hand to keep your mob away from us. And until they get here, you can talk with the Fairfax Police. They should be here in a few minutes."

Chapter FIFTY-TWO

"You called me to the CDC on Thanksgiving for this?" Evridge Clancy pushed back from the long conference table and fumed. "I don't know what you've all been smoking, but as far as I know, you don't fight a pandemic with angels! My family is—"

Dr. Morales raised both hands in protest. "Please, Mr. Clancy." She'd been concerned that the two academics they'd invited to the meeting might balk at the concept, but wasn't prepared for the man's vehemence. Her focus narrowed to his broad face as she fought the impulse to snap at him. "We're deadly serious about this. I understand your reaction to the idea. I was doubtful at first, myself. But it's where the data leads."

He glared at her.

"Five minutes. That's all I ask. Hear me out for five minutes before making up your mind. After that, if you still think this is a waste of your time, then you can leave. All right?"

Clancy glanced around the table. He was annoyed at being on equal footing with students, and furious at Dr. Namidy, the only other member of the GMU faculty at the table, for having shortchanged his fellow teaching assistants two days earlier. "Sure."

"Good." She studied him briefly. "All right, I'll try to lay it all out for you as quickly as I can. Burnout Fever has presented the CDC with a problem that we have not been able to solve. There appear to be two distinct contact networks behind the patterns of spread, but only one of them can be mapped to physical transmission vectors. In other words, the individual cases might be explained by the existence of something in the environment, and spread by direct or proximate contact, but the sets of simultaneous cases cannot."

He nodded, and slowly crossed his arms against what was coming next.

"Mr. Donahue, who runs the GMU Computational Dynamics Lab, approached the problem differently. He crafted a model that could explain the data, and left it up to us to explain it. Looking at just the simultaneous cases, he found that they implied the existence of a hypothetical scale-free network linking people in ways that we cannot point to."

"Okay. I'll follow you that far, but why did you have to drag in something as irrational as angels to explain it?"

Sheralyn Fornét shook her head. "But they're not—"

Morales shot her a look of extreme annoyance, and then turned back towards Clancy. "I asked you to hear me out. We don't know what this hypothetical network might be, but we do know that there are several models available from the fields of religion and philosophy. Ms. Fornét's angels are only a starting point. We asked you and Dr. Namidy to join us today so we could intelligently explore the subject, and see what insights can be gained from looking at the problem through other worldviews as well."

Clancy's severe expression eased a bit. "So it doesn't have to be angels?"

She chuckled. "Of course not. Besides, the same concept has gone by a lot of different names

though the ages. Before you arrived, Dr. Namidy was telling us how angels figure into some of the world's religions."

"Okay, okay. I'll stay. But I still have to leave by three. It is Thanksgiving, after all."

"I understand. We'll just continue this tomorrow. For right now, though, we have a lot of work to do."

Namidy looked up from Melissa's sketch. "Should I continue, then?"

"Sure, but you might want to go back over what you told us before Mr. Clancy arrived."

She slid the open pad to Fornét, who sat to her right, and then templed her fingers in thought. "As I understand it, this line of reasoning was instigated by Reverend McQuarry's talks, but brought to a fine focus, if Miss Fox's rendering is any indication, by Ms. Fornét's two webcasts."

Fornét nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Namidy responded. "Angels, by whatever names, have figured prominently in many of the world's religions, but this may be the first time that they've been thought of as our peers, as being part of a real community, and as — if I may misuse the term — mortal. The Judeo-Christian take on angels, for instance, draws from early Judaic tradition, but even so, each religion or sect has put its own distinctive mark on their understanding of what they are and what they do. One thing that they all seem to agree on is that whatever they are, these beings form a hierarchy leading to God."

"In some traditions, these beings are different from us in that they don't have free will, but must instead follow the dictates of their betters. That distinction may not have any basis, but it has given rise to all kinds of mythology, including the creation of so-called devils."

Clancy shrugged. "So what? What does any of that have to do with Burnout Fever?"

Silas tapped the table. "It's the hierarchy. The fact that so many traditions agree on that suggests that there may be something to it."

"Or that they all just stole it from one another."

"I don't think so. But I also don't think the people who set up those religions understood it too well either. Attributing a hierarchy to them might just have been a reflection of their own need for it. Who knows, if they really exist, maybe they've got some other kind of community."

"Maybe," Namidy said, lost in thought. "I mean, think about it. The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches both talk about a hierarchy of nine choirs of angels, and that there are three levels. Who knows, that could be the angelic equivalent of city, state and federal governments. What it doesn't tell us is how all those angels relate to one another, or how they spend their time. Hindus may call them spirit beings, but the devas, asperas, asuras and the rest still trace out the same sort of pattern. Even the Islamic angels have a tendency to appear in dreams or visions."

Fornét nodded. "Like mine."

Melissa, Barry and Derek all murmured agreement.

Sid, who had been worriedly watching the discussion, breathed heavily. "All right, all right. I know I suggested that there must be some kind of phantom network connecting the group burnouts, but even if these angels, or whatever you want to call them, do exist, how do they affect people? As far as I know, every one of those religions says that these things aren't material beings. So how do they do it?"

"They may not be strictly material," Namidy said offhandedly, "but there's plenty of scriptural support for the effects they've had on people. In fact, if you recall the story of Jacob, one of them was supposed to have wrestled with him."

"But that isn't conclusive. Wrestling can mean either verbally or physically."

"In English, maybe," Namidy admitted, "but the Aramaic was specific. It was physical."

Barry held up a hand. "Hold on there. Didn't Maimonides write that they were just metaphorical?"

"Sure. But he wasn't there. Inadmissible."

Nobody said anything for almost a minute. Clancy stopped in the midst of rubbing his neck and sniffed. "I guess that puts it in my ballpark, then."

Morales looked at him quizzically. "You had a thought?"

"Yeah. Call it a hunch. One thing that all those mythologies have in common is that whatever these beings are, they have the ability to guide us. Now, in most cases, that's accomplished through visions and dreams, or by leaning on a person's own conscience. But to do that, wouldn't there have to be some sort of a cognitive connection, a way for the angel or whatever to get into the person's mind?"

"I guess. What are you getting at?"

"That that's how it's done. That whatever's going on, it gets into people that way."

"What?" Barry said, shaking his head. "You mean like a mimetic virus — a toxic idea?"

"Your word, not mime."

Morales twitched. She looked down and grabbed her phone, which was vibrating. The conversation was mostly one-sided, but her smile indicated that there was news of some sort. When she was finished, she laid the handset on the table and grinned.

"That was Atlanta. They've isolated the trigger. Apparently, when the vagrant molecule gets into the brain's limbic system, it breaks a chain of biochemical reactions crucial to the functioning of the amygdala, causing Burnout Fever."

Silas reached for the sky and let out a whoop. "That's great!"

"There's more. They've also identified the source of the vagrant molecule. It's a breakdown product of a time-release mechanism developed by a multi-national called PanAgra. The stuff is apparently in their new chocolate bars."

Barry turned livid. "PanAgra? You mean those DuraBars are causing all this hell? McKnight did that to Melanie? Chocolate mess, my ass! I should have killed that bastard when I had the chance!"

Derek grabbed his friend's wrists and kept him seated. "Hey! Calm down, Barr. What are you talking about?"

He swallowed. "Do you remember the disastrous job interview Melanie went on after she got BF? A PR company she'd done some work for wanted her to write some white papers to cover their client's ass. The client was PanAgra, and they needed to clean up what he jokingly called a 'chocolate mess'. Only at the time, the only mess they knew about was the fact that they'd used GMOs to make their time-release mechanism."

"Okay. It's public knowledge now. They'll have plenty to answer for."

"Not them. Him! I sat next to that creep on the flight out here!"

Silas stood and looked around uncomfortably. "I think we ought to end it here for now. Look, everyone go home. Have Thanksgiving with your families, and we'll meet back here tomorrow at noon."

Barry snarled at him. "Right. How am I going to do that? Melanie's in Seattle!"

Morales put two fingers on the far side of his jaw and turned his face towards her. "No she's not."

"What?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise. The CDC decided to fold Project Iris into Ezra Silas' team because of all the staff losses to Burnout Fever. Melanie and your friend Ronnie came in on an Air Force jet a little while ago. They're waiting for us at Congressman Fox's townhouse."

Barry was speechless.

Chapter FIFTY-THREE

Melanie sat down beside Congresswoman Haekson and eyed her nervously. Lillian fidgeted and quickly looked away. Before the CDC's Air Force escort brought her and Ronnie to Congressman Fox's townhouse an hour earlier, Melanie had been shielded from the awkwardness of being at a loss for context. Between Barry's gentle assistance and their escort's insistence on being in charge, the most public indication that she had Burnout Fever didn't seem to matter.

Even during the initial introductions, which Fox had navigated nearly as smoothly as Ronnie did, she felt as comfortable as she imagined she might have before getting Burnout Fever. But after the escort excused themselves and Ronnie joined Fox in the dining room to chat about Project Iris, she began to feel nervous, unsure of what to do or what to say. Fortunately, Fox had left her with an opening, a safe avenue for their discussion to proceed without risk of losing context, when he mentioned that Lillian was a member of Congress.

She smiled inwardly at having found a solution to the problem. "What is it like being in

Congress?"

Lillian relaxed. "Very satisfying, really. I won't be staying after my term expires, though."

"Oh?"

"With Burnout Fever, I wouldn't be able to handle the chaos of debates and press confrontations in an election campaign. They change the subject too much. My staff helps me keep up during meetings and conferences, but that wouldn't be possible in an election."

Melanie winced, imagining what it must be like. "Then what would you do?"

"I don't know. Arthur said I could stay with him."

"Do you have family in Washington?"

"Just Arthur and Melissa." She paused for a moment and looked around. "Did I tell you that she calls me her Aunt Lilly?"

"That's sweet. Are you friends with any of your other colleagues in Congress?"

"Beside Arthur? Sure. But I don't think he'll get elected again."

"Who's that?"

"Oh, sorry. Fredrik Malden has been a dear friend ever since I got to Washington. He showed me around when I arrived, and introduced me to his twin brother from Providence."

Melanie frowned. "Why don't you think he'd get elected again? Does he have Burnout Fever, too?"

"No, but his bother does." She looked down.

"What's wrong, Lillian?"

"Last week, Fredrick's reputation was ruined. Someone accused him of having Burnout Fever and of hiding it, when the truth was that he'd just been out of town a lot visiting with his brother. The news showed pictures of his brother, but claimed it was him."

"That's terrible. Can he do anything?"

She shook her head. "He tried, but they wouldn't listen. The newspapers and TV don't even do their own research anymore. They just take what they're handed and go with it. The accusation was provided by an anonymous source, and it was dressed up in a press release. Public Relations people can be really hard to deal with."

"I know. I used to write white papers for one of them." She frowned, and turned to stare out the window.

Lillian put her hand over Melanie's and waited.

She sat quite still, a blank look on her face, humming the odd tune that Kim Novak had hummed at her cat in 'Bell, Book and Candle'. But a minute later, she suddenly broke out into a broad smile and stood up.

"What is it?"

"They're here!" She crossed to the door, and opened it without waiting for a knock.

Melissa looked up when the door swung away from the key she was holding. Melanie craned to see over her shoulder, and started crying at the sight of Barry. Melissa ducked out of the way to let them hug. A moment later, Derek and Dr. Morales edged past them as well, leaving a serene-looking woman in a dark green coat standing alone on the step, holding a bag in one hand, and a cardboard tube in the other.

"Hey, you two," Derek said as he removed his coat, "it's cold out there. Do you mind if our guest comes in so we can shut the door?"

She eyed the woman curiously. "Guest?"

"Yeah. And I think you might want to meet her. She's from Shasta Lake."

Fornét smiled. "You must be Melanie."

She released Barry and looked into his eyes. "I've been so worried about you. Who is she?"

He lifted her in his arms and swung her out of the way, so Fornét could enter. Once the door was closed and their guest had handed her bag and coat to Fox, he said, "Melanie, I'd like you to meet Sheralyn Fornét. She worked with Reverend McQuarry, and we've asked her here to help us understand his angels better."

"Angels?" She glanced at him, and then visibly relaxed. "I've got something to show you."

Fornét held out the tube. "And I have a gift for you."

Chapter FIFTY-FOUR

Arthur Fox opened his eyes and listened. The sky outside his bedroom window was edging towards dawn, and the sudden blast that had jolted him awake was still echoing through the streets. He rolled back slightly to look over his shoulder at Lilly, and sighed in relief when he decided that she was still sleeping. He carefully slid out from under the covers, and drew the comforter up to keep her warm. She'd claimed that sleeping with him was simply a matter of courtesy to their guest, since it freed up a second bedroom, but he knew better. They'd been working towards this when she got Burnout Fever, and he had resigned himself to never knowing the pleasure of her coital embrace. Perhaps he should thank Sheralyn Fornét for the favor.

Considering the number of government officials in the neighborhood, police cruisers patrolled it regularly. An explosion, if that's what it was, probably meant that someone's furnace had failed spectacularly. He figured that offering a warm place to wait for service was the least he could do, so he dressed quietly in the dark, and headed downstairs.

He pulled the front door shut while slipping his other arm through his coat, and finished buttoning it while looking around. The last of the stars were fading, and the morning stillness might have given him the feeling that the world was holding its breath, if it wasn't for the distinct crackling sound coming from somewhere to his right. He took a cold breath and started out, past the growing mass of uncollected garbage along the curb, towards the disturbance.

When Fox rounded the corner, he stopped short and gaped. A black limousine with DPL tags was ablaze in front of the second house, its driver-side door open and its glass shattered from the blast. On the street, just past the open door, lay the half-burned remains of a man in a black leather jacket, his face crisped and his right hand flayed to the bone. Beyond him there was an upturned plastic case, and a scattering of wires, tools and small electronics. He cringed from the sight and winced at the acrid stench.

The owner of that house stood on her porch in a sheer nightgown, eerily lit by the flickering blaze, shaking the phone in her hand and screaming obscenities at nobody.

"What happened, Imogin?" he called, drawing closer.

She coughed, raised her free hand and gestured weakly towards the limo. "He must have been trying to sabotage Yugi's car."

"Have you called 911?"

She glared at him in helpless rage. "They don't answer!"

He squinted at the flames and thought for a moment. "How about the fire department?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. I can't get through to anyone. The phone system must be down or something."

"How about the landline? Have you tried your house phone?"

"That's dead, too. There's nothing I can do."

"Arthur?" It was Morales, standing just behind him to the right.

He turned and looked at her, speechless.

She took a pained glance at the blazing car. "What's going on?"

"Hard to say. Ambassador Keno is out of town right now, renegotiating a suspect treaty. Whoever that poor guy was, he didn't have any business in that car. Keno's wife thinks he might have been trying to sabotage it."

Morales forced herself to look at the dead man. "Why?"

Fox snapped at her. "Who knows? Maybe he didn't like the fact that the original treaty was tossed out because Secretary of State Guillen wasn't present. If it was a time bomb, I wouldn't be surprised if the timer was defective. Just about everything is anymore."

She frowned at his reaction. "So is the fire department on the way?"

He looked over at Imogin in exasperation. "She says the phones are all dead."

"What?"

He closed his eyes tightly and wobbled slightly. "I said the phones are dead. Didn't you—"

Fox suddenly collapsed. His legs folded under him, and he reached out to break his fall, but his aim was off and he fell on his side. Morales knelt beside him. "Are you okay?"

He looked up at her. "I don't hurt or anything, but my balance just went out."

"Were you dizzy first?"

He nodded. "Yeah. It's probably another flair of my MS. The experimental treatment I was having kept them at bay, but ever since the Election Day attack, I've been getting worse."

She put her arm around him and helped him up. "Come on. We should get you to your

doctor.”

“But what about the fire? What about that man?”

She looked back at the fire. “It’ll burn itself out, I suppose. And he’s already dead, so wherever his spirit was going, it’s already on its way.”

Chapter FIFTY-FIVE

Melanie stayed in the hallway after the rest of Project Iris filed into the suite of offices used by the GMU Burnout Fever research team. Ronnie stood just inside, waiting to see what she would do.

“It doesn’t have a name,” she said, studying the black plastic sign beside the door.

“A name?”

“Sure.” She looked at him solemnly. “When Leslie Omak started the team at UW, she called it Project Iris, so people wouldn’t lose sight of why we were there. The thought of what it must be like for Iris to have gotten this in high school... to have her world close in on her like this in a place with worse demands on her attention than I have... it gave me something to focus on. Knowing that she was out there, that she was depending on me to do something about it, well, it helped me to get past what Burnout Fever had taken away, so I could help others who had gotten it.”

Ezra Silas returned from further in the suite and stopped beside Ronnie. “Is there a problem?” Melanie nodded. “If we’re going to work together, the new team needs a name.”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then smiled. “Oh, like Project Iris. Sure. Did you have something in mind?”

She looked away. “You’re going to think it’s silly.”

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Come on, what is it?”

She glanced at Ronnie for support, but then straightened and looked squarely at Silas. “I was curious about Iris’s name. The librarian back home said that she was the Greek goddess of rainbows. She was a winged messenger, and carried the sacred water of truth.”

“And...?”

“Yesterday after dinner, Sheralyn Fornét gave me a gift, a print of her favorite painting. She said it’s called ‘Death of the Gravedigger’, but to me it seemed more like the winged angel kneeling on the snow was going to hand the flame she carried to the old man so it could be buried like a seed, so it could grow.”

Ronnie blinked a few times, his eyes darting to places of memory and imagination.

“So I think the painting is really about rebirth. The old man in the hole just dropped his shovel, and he’s opening his other hand to take the flame from her.”

“But what does that have to do with Iris?”

She shrugged; amazed that he didn’t get it. “It’s the light of truth she’s holding, one of the colors of the rainbow she walks. I think we should call this place The Green Iris. You know, like a tavern or a coffeehouse.”

“Okay,” Silas said agreeably. “I’ll have someone take care of it.” He extended a hand. “In that case, Melanie, I’d like to welcome you to The Green Iris. Come on in and meet the others.”

Satisfied, she took his hand and the three joined the rest of the combined team in a nearby conference room. There were too many names to remember, so she tuned out the words and studied the bouquet of faces from around the world. She sat quietly while people from each team took turns introducing themselves and answering the odd question or two. She watched Ronnie when he told how he’d first met Al at a software conference in DC, but didn’t pay attention to what he was saying. She was still off in her own private world when she realized that everyone was looking at her.

“What? Did I do something wrong?”

Silas laughed. "Not at all. I just introduced you to everyone, and we were waiting for some kind of response, that's all."

"Response? Like what?" She scanned the faces around the table, and the ones standing along the walls, and then stopped to admire the gentle green eyes of the woman seated directly across from her. "Did someone ask a question?"

The woman she was studying smiled. "No, but I'd like to ask you one anyway."

Melanie waited.

"I understand that you've had Burnout Fever for a few months now." She paused briefly to judge any reaction she might get, but seeing none, she continued with her thought. "A lot of things have been said about the disease, and about the people who have gotten it. Does it bother you?"

She nodded. "Yes, but maybe not the way you think. At first, I was worried about being damned, because of what Wilfred—"

Ronnie hastily inserted, "Reverend McQuarry."

"—said, but I knew I was listening to my Angels, so that couldn't be true. Why else would I have spent so much time sketching them? But after a while... after a while, they started to change. I could tell that the Angels were being hurt by something, and I felt sorry for them, but there really wasn't anything I could do about it. Then my sketches showed me someone in a dark room, and that led me to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poems, where I found one about me in a candy store. I was pretty happy about that, even though I didn't understand what it was all about, because it meant I wasn't lost."

She looked around the table, and realized that even if she wasn't lost, the others in the room were. Well, except for Ronnie. But then, he'd been there. He knew what she'd been through.

"Where was I?"

The green-eyed woman slid her hand towards her. "You were telling us how you felt about the things that have been said about Burnout Fever."

"Right. Thank you. Working with Leslie gave me a purpose. I can't go back to what I used to do — my writing isn't what it used to be — but I wonder what I'll do once we're finished, once we've helped find a way to stop it. This has become my life, and I'm worried that when it's done there won't be a place for me, or for Iris, even if she manages to graduate."

Ronnie broke the lengthy silence that followed with a question of his own. "Not to change the subject too drastically, but since I couldn't sleep last night, I went out for a drive to see how much the place had changed."

Relieved at the change of mood, several people asked what he found.

"It's filthy. What's with all the garbage, anyway?"

Silas shook his head. "The sanitation department was hit especially hard by Burnout Fever, and they'd been sucking down all the free DuraBars they could get in order to handle the long shifts and missing workers. But even then, they couldn't keep up with the load. Well, based on yesterday's news from Atlanta, I guess they pretty much sealed their own fate, which probably explains why nothing was picked up this morning. They're probably all waiting in line at the hospitals, but from what I heard, the hospital staffs all did the exact same thing. It's a major meltdown of the infra—"

The door burst open and everyone looked over at the irate man leaning on the handle.

"I'm glad you could join us, Sid."

"Sorry I'm late, but I can't stay," he panted. "I've been trying since last night to put together some important material for the noon meeting down on Capitol Hill, and nothing is going right."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"How are you on miracles?" He glared angrily around the room. "The phones have been down for hours, and now so is the Internet. We've got a data connection to our ISP, but they don't connect to any of the backbones, so I can't get anywhere. If you ask me, all of the NAPs are down, now. I need data from the other research sites, and there's just no way to get it!"

"Try asking the National Guard unit in the lobby. They must have radios or something."

Sid nodded and left.

Chapter FIFTY-SIX

"Thanks for the ride, Mrs. Keno," Fornét said as she thumbed the latch open. "I hope they find out who that poor charred man in the street was. His family is probably as worried about him as I am about Congressman Fox." She got out and gently closed the expensive sedan's door, then waved as Fox's neighbor drove off into the chaotic traffic.

The National Guardsman in the lobby of the CDC's building asked to see her ID, and checked it against his list. "You're cleared to go in, Ms. Fornét. By the way, my baby sister is counting on you to help get this mystery solved."

"Oh? Does she have Burnout Fever?"

"Yes, ma'am. She was also a devoted member of Reverend McQuarry's Internet flock. Our family is Episcopalian, and I accepted the relationship she had with her Angel as a form of personal prayer. Our parents didn't quite see it that way, though." He studied her for a moment. "I understand you did a few webcasts after he was, um, taken ill."

"That's right. In fact, that's why they asked for my help here."

"What do they think you can do?"

"I'm not sure. Dr. Morales, the researcher who invited me, seems to think that my visions have something to do with it. At least that's the sense I got from talking with her over dinner yesterday."

"I don't mean to pry, but do you have any family in the area?"

She smiled. "No. I think I've just been adopted, though."

He hefted his clipboard. "Well, I guess you ought to be going in. According to this, your meeting started already."

When she opened the door to the conference room, Derek was standing with his back to her, his arms spread wide and his fingers curled like talons. "You heard me, Clancy! Nobody's leaving this room until we're finished. I wouldn't care if your brother were visiting from Mars. There's more at stake here than just your piddling career!"

Fornét's heart raced, her fingers slick with sudden sweat. She released the handle and leaned against the open door, trying to see around Derek. Clancy was out of his seat and looking for an opening. The two men seemed like a misplaced scene from a wrestling show.

"A lot you know about careers. All you care about is your ridiculous crusade to rewrite the constitution!"

Barry glanced at the open door and rushed between them. "Stop it, both of you! We all had a tough time getting here. Ordinarily I'd say that was beside the point, but this time it's exactly the point! That mess out there was caused by the problem we're here to solve. Now both of you sit down. Ms. Fornét just got here, and the others are probably tied up in traffic somewhere."

Clancy backed up, and Derek dropped his arms. He swung around and smiled. "Good, now we're down to just three people missing."

Fornét glanced around the room. The chair beside Melissa was turned backwards, which probably meant that's where Derek had been sitting. Namidy, her eyes wide and breathing heavily, sat across from them. Clancy grabbed the empty seat beside his colleague and fell into it. She looked at Melissa and sighed. "Then Dr. Morales isn't here either?"

"Didn't she stay at my dad's with you and my Aunt Lilly last night?"

"Sure, but everyone was gone when I woke up. With the phone dead, I wouldn't have gotten here at all if your father's neighbor hadn't stopped by to see how he was doing?"

"My fa—? Is he okay?"

"I don't know. Mrs. Keno said that her husband's limousine was firebombed early this morning, and that Congressman Fox walked over to see what had happened. Just after Dr. Morales joined him, he got dizzy and collapsed. She said she thought that Elena was going to take him to see his doctor."

Derek rejoined Melissa. "That sounds like another flare."

"I know. Which probably means they'd have gone to the Northern Virginia Neurological Institute, where he was getting the experimental MS treatment. I wish we could call, but the phones are all down."

Clancy shook his head. "Great. How can we help the CDC if they're not even here? So now what do we do?"

Barry sat at the head of the table, where Morales had been yesterday. "Well, with the phones down, we can't call the others anyway, so we might as well just get started."

Fornet, looking very distressed, sat at the far end of the table between Derek and Clancy. "Then who's going to run the meeting? Elena — I mean Dr. Morales — asked me to participate, but I don't really know what she had in mind."

"I guess we'll just have to wing it."

Chapter Fifty-SEVEN

The lobby of the GMU Life Sciences Building was empty when Sid got there.

"Sergeant Rafferty? Lieutenant Juarez?" he called. "Damn. There's never a National Guardsman around when you need one."

At a loss for what to do, he walked towards the doors and looked out into the cold, sunlit quad, shielding his eyes momentarily from a glint of reflected light. Peering through the glare, he realized that the reflection wasn't from a bit of lingering ice on Mason Pond, but rather from the display of the satellite phone clipped to one of the guardsmen's uniforms. He pushed the door open and shivered as the chill air blew across his bare arms and through his thin t-shirt.

The door closed behind him with an unfamiliar click. He turned around and pulled, but nothing happened. It was locked from the outside. Turning back towards the guardsmen, he started down the steps and across the pavement. They had faced off against a group of about a dozen protesters, several of whom brandished signs demonizing Burnout Fever and demanding that the research be terminated. As he got closer, he realized that the guardsmen were focused on one of them, apparently the ringleader.

"Lieutenant?" he called as he approached.

Juarez, his hand still extended to stop whatever was happening, looked over his shoulder.

"I need to call someone on your satphone. The landlines and the cell systems are all down, and I can't even get out over the Internet."

"Can it wait? We're busy here."

"Actually, no. I need to get some information for a meeting with the CDC."

One of the protesters shook his sign. "Hey! He's one of them!"

"I said freeze!"

Rafferty glanced at the Lieutenant. "It's okay. We spoke earlier. Mr. Donahue is analyzing data for the project. Give him the phone. I can handle this."

The leader took advantage of the distraction and broke into a run. "Not if I can help it!" He careened past Rafferty, nearly losing his balance on the mushy ground, and slammed shoulder first into Sid.

"Hey!" he protested as he hit the muck.

While Juarez reached for the man's raised arm, Sid grabbed the wrist he was still supporting himself with and jerked it out from under him, leaving him dangling. Juarez pulled him to his feet, and whipped his arm behind his back. "Would you prefer to be arrested, or to leave campus under your own power?"

Sid watched while he stood and brushed chunks of nearly frozen mud off his clothes.

"Well? What's it to be?"

Rafferty unclipped a digicam from his belt and snapped the man's picture, then shoved it under his face. "State your name. We're keeping records."

"Jeffries. Malcolm Jeffries."

"Well, Mr. Jeffries, I suggest that you not make a practice of disturbing anyone else. Your picture and voiceprint will be on file. Now get out of here, all of you!"

Sid stood shivering, waiting for Juarez to return from escorting them off the quad. When he got back, he unclipped the phone. "Okay. Who do you need to talk to?"

"NASA. I need someone with access to some work instigated by the Columbia Accident Investigation Board."

Chapter Fifty-EIGHT

Orvielle Namidy shook her head and frowned. "Okay, look. This isn't getting us anywhere. Dr. Morales asked Mr. Clancy and me to provide some additional perspectives on the phantom network that supposedly connects group cases of Burnout Fever, but rationalizing the various hierarchies of angels or whatever we're going to call them isn't getting us any closer to understanding what's happening to their social structure."

Melissa leaned towards her. "Then what do you suggest?"

"I don't really know. As I understand it, the point of trying to make sense of the metaphysical aspect of the disease is to figure out how it spreads in groups, but if what Ms. Fornét claims is true, then whatever social order exists among these entities must be under terrific stress. Look at it from their point of view. Entities are having bits of themselves whacked off for no apparent reason, and some of them are just vanishing. If they're anything like us, then there's got to be an element of panic at work as well. At least we know about the molecule that causes this thing in the first place, what do they know about it?"

Fornét cringed from the sudden attention. "They know how much it hurts to lose a part of themselves, for one thing. Remember, from their point of view, we're like dreams, except that they know full well that we're real, that we have free will, and that pain, fear and death are every bit as real to us as it is to them. When one of them loses contact with one of us, they have the cognitive equivalent of phantom limb syndrome: they experience the pain that their lost extension must be feeling, even though they can no longer feel it directly."

"Okay, but do they grieve?" Barry asked. "Reverend McQuarry never got into that sort of thing. He was just focused on how his Angels were there to guide us."

She thought briefly. "I guess that's one big difference between us and them. We don't consider our dream selves real enough to worry about. When we wake up and return to this reality, we just let it go. Most people rarely return to the same dream life, so there's not much point in it. But it's very different for them. When they create a dream self to live in our world, they do it to experience his or her entire life. In a way, it's not much different from the effort that Japanese school kids put into raising and caring for their virtual tamagotchi pets. I've heard that when one of their pets dies, the kids go through the entire mourning process."

"Now wait a minute," Clancy said. "What about time? If one of these entities or whatever vicariously experiences my entire life, doesn't that mean it takes my entire lifetime to happen? How long do these things live, anyway?"

"I don't think it works that way. I've heard that you can have an entire dream in an instant, even if seems to go on for days. From the entity's point of view, your life might be all one gestalt, rather than a series of events."

"Listen," Derek said. "I've been wondering about the entity's little community of dream-selves. Sheralyn, you said that these entities can have any number of them, depending on how good they are at it, right?"

"Precisely. They learn how to multi-task, just like we do."

"But what's the relationship among an entity's dream selves? Is there one?"

"Do you mean, can they communicate with one another?"

"Basically, yeah."

Fornét looked at Clancy. "I don't have a degree in philosophy, so you might have to help me with this. Imagine that you're one of the entities for a moment. One of the things you do is to create dream selves that live in various times and places in another reality context. One of them is more than enough for beginners, but imagine you've been doing this for some time now, and you've gotten pretty good at it. So let's say you've got a dozen of these dream selves running around, each with their own problems, each living their life here on Earth. Now let me pose a question: what do people know or do that we can't explain?"

Melissa shrugged. "Intuitions, I guess."

"And visions," Namidy suggested. "That's been a recurring theme throughout the world's religions. Are you suggesting that they're a result of the connection between people and their higher beings?"

Fornét nodded. "Either that, or a connection that goes even further. I suspect that a lot of what we pass off as noise actually comes from the higher being, or from one of the other people connected to it. You know, like an unexplained interest in Germany or a fascination with glass blowing."

Barry held up a finger. "What do you mean, 'further'?"

"Well, we were talking about the community of entities, so maybe they have connections among themselves as well, and maybe even to whatever it was that dreamed the entities into existence."

Derek glanced at Melanie. "You mean like a hierarchy of entities? Something that would map to the hierarchy of Angels?"

"Exactly. And a vision strong enough to have launched a major religion could be one that went further than just to an entity, or to a member of it's local group of dream selves, but to the next level up. For most people, that would be tantamount to communing with God."

Namidy bit her lip. "Now we're getting into some tricky territory. Some religions say that we can all talk directly with God; others say we need an intermediary like a priest."

"Yeah," Clancy shot back, "and I've heard the Ark of the Covenant described as a kind of cosmic radio set."

"Which would make sense in a way," Fornét added, "if it enabled Aaron to bypass the entity he was directly connected to and commune with something further up the ladder."

Derek, who had been staring at the table, looked up suddenly. "How much do you know about Auguste Bartholdi?"

Chapter Fifty-NINE

Rodney Falk was stumped. He looked to Gisela for moral support, but she just shrugged, so he glared back at the leader of the disorganized mob surrounding them on the Capitol Mall and plunged on regardless. "Look, I know that PanAgra was responsible for this mess, but I can't believe they did it on purpose. Besides, don't their lobby sharks have a lock on Congress already?"

She laughed wryly. "But that's the whole point: they don't. Scarloti, May had to call in a hired gun to replace Grznowski because they were out of options. And now their scheme has been completely discredited. Whatever influence they had over congress is gone, and that's the power vacuum we intend to fill."

Yesterday's revelations about PanAgra by the CDC had spurred several groups into action. The anti-globalism mob jeering at Rodney and Gisela at the moment was simply the loudest of them. The two had caught wind of the spontaneous gatherings late last night, and had decided to speak with the organizers.

"That's all well and good, but what about the others out here? From what I can tell, they've all got the same idea. If you really want to get anywhere, you're going to have to throw together and agree on some goals, or you're just going to end up in open grassroots warfare."

"You're damn right!"

All three turned to look at the intruder, a thirty-ish man in a pea jacket, flanked by two rough looking characters with a definite military bearing.

The leader smiled. "Oh. Hi, Jason. I didn't realize your gang was down here, too."

"Did you think I was going to let you get all the grease?" He glanced at Gisela. "I don't know who your friends are, but I think they've got a point. Got any ideas?"

"Hey!" Gisella shouted. "Would someone hand me a program?"

He stepped uncomfortably close and looked into her eyes. "Sure, red. My friends call me Jay. We're here to make sure that PanAgra's other problem doesn't get neglected."

She stood her ground. "Other problem?"

"Yeah. Remember that bio-attack on Election Day? Who do you think made the toxin? Their ChemCo subsidiary thinks it can fly under the radar by supplying T2 to the UN for drug interdiction work, but they sell twice that amount to thugs on the black market."

"And I suppose you also know who pulled off that stunt?"

He laughed haughtily. "Now why would you think that – just because we have a history of making threats? Everyone knows we never make good on them. They're just a bluff, after all."

Rodney pushed into the man's field of vision. "Would you mind not crowding the lady? We're

trying to conduct some business here.”

He took a step back and turned around. “Okay Sheila, how do you want to work this?”

“Christ, Jason, when are you going to get over yourself? I’ve had about as much of your passive-aggressive shit as I can stand. We’re looking at the opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to get some traction with the government, and all you can think of is how to sound important. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you save us all some trouble? Go round up the rest of your thugs, and go turn yourselves in for disturbing the peace.”

“I just don’t understand you. One moment you’re all cuddly, and the next... Look, if that’s the way you want to be, fine. But don’t come begging for favors once we’ve got our fingers around the gullet of the idiots who run this ‘great’ republic.”

Jason sneered at her, then twirled his finger in the air and led his entourage out of the anti-globalist mob. Sheila turned her back, and started shouting stage directions to her followers. In moments, the two groups were engaged in a non-verbal standoff across the Mall, leaving Rodney and Gisela stranded in a kind of non-violent demilitarized zone between them.

“Great,” he grumbled. “So much for trying to play peacemaker.”

Gisela stood in the greensward, studying the various groups for a while. But then her posture shifted and she half raised her arm towards a small knot of uniforms to the south. “Who are they?”

He turned to look. “Some kind of security workers, I guess. What do you suppose they’re doing out here?”

“Good question.” She walked towards them, and Rodney quickly caught up. As they approached, they started to catch bits of conversation. A heavyset woman with her back to them seemed to be holding force at the moment.

—but that’s the whole point. PanAgra may have provided the bars, but they could never have done it without the active cooperation of management. And now they’ve got the nerve to disallow coverage to our friends, even though they lost their jobs because of management’s collusion with Scarloti, May.”

The uniformed man before her shook his head sharply. “But Isalyn, that was an accident. They weren’t trying to harm us. It was an innocent attempt to help us get through all the extra shifts.”

Gisela stepped through a gap in the crowd. “Excuse me, but did you just mention PanAgra?”

“Look, we’re in the middle of something.”

“I apologize for the interruption, but I think there’s something bigger going on out here.”

She took a breath. “Okay. What?”

“Look around. Do you see all these people out here? We’ve been talking to them, and every one of these groups intends to use PanAgra’s role in causing Burnout Fever to grab power from someone. And they don’t seem to have any problem with using violence to get it, either.”

“So? That’s not our problem. We’re just trying to get medical coverage for our friends.”

Gisela pointed to the woman’s security insignia. “Aren’t you folks in the business of keeping order?”

She sighed. “I suppose. The security company we work for handles most of the federal buildings on the hill. What about it?”

“Look around. Do you see any police?”

“Why do you keep changing the subject?”

“I’m not. I’m just trying to point out that you’re the closest thing we have out here to actual law enforcement.”

Rodney touched her arm. “I think we’d better go.”

Isalyn laughed. “‘Law enforcement’? Did you think the DC police were immune to this thing? We walked off the job this morning because management wanted us to assume police powers.”

He stood down. “Why did they do that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? No cops.”

“None?”

“Not unless you count the ones waiting on line at all the hospitals. The city’s pretty much on its own right now.”

He looked at Gisela, and then turned to scan the skirmishes breaking out across the Mall. “This doesn’t look good.”

Isalyn nodded in satisfaction. “Now will you two please leave us alone?”

As soon as she was back out in the open, Gisela unclipped her phone and smiled. “Hey, the signal’s back.”

Rodney nodded. "In that case, why don't you give Derek a shout?"

A few moments later, she had him on the line. "Listen, we've got a grassroots crisis brewing out on the Mall. Can you break free for a while?"

Chapter SIXTY

Everidge Clancy watched the door swing slowly shut behind Derek. "This isn't getting any easier. How are we expected to find an answer to this problem if the people we need keep leaving?"

Barry buried his face in his hands and let out a long moan.

"What?"

He looked up. "Oh, nothing. It's just that we're having a miniature version of the problem we're trying to solve. Here we are, a tight-knit little community of individuals with not much in common, brought together by an interest that isn't obvious, and one by one we're being picked off. If you're feeling vulnerable, imagine how the rest of the world must feel by now, how these entities must feel."

Melissa shook her head. "Look, could you two stop bickering? Derek's not dead, you know. Besides, I think the symbolism in his fountain helped to get us into neutral territory."

"Great," Namidy said, "so we can talk about chunks of iron instead of particular angels. That still doesn't get us any closer to understanding how the connections work. I mean, sure, we can think of the tritons at the top of the thing like they were archangels, but does that make whatever's in the crown the Supreme Being? It just seems overly simplified, if you ask me."

Fornét shrugged. "So what? Bartholdi was a sculptor. He was just trying to represent an idea, not model it down to the last detail. The whole point of symbolism is to turn something complex into a simple suggestive image, a visual message to think about. And even then, it's the person looking at it that gets to decide what it means." She looked at Barry. "For years, I thought the print I gave Melanie meant one thing, and then in an instant it was transformed into something quite different, simply by getting another perspective on it. Now I'm not quite sure what it means, but having more than one interpretation made looking at it a richer experience."

Clancy eyed her warily. "So you're in favor of the multiple meanings scenario."

"Sure. It's no different from anything else. Rain's just wet, but it can mean a lot of different things."

"So what's your take on this?"

Fornét considered him briefly. "Well, I look at things a bit differently."

Clancy looked away. "Tell me about it."

She winced at the covert attack. "I'll try. According to Masra, the various descriptions of angel hierarchies say more about the people relating them than anything else. But what really upsets her is the contention that entities like her have no free will. She says that's just sour grapes, an explanation to cover why the people who started that idea couldn't get their higher beings to do what they wanted."

Namidy chuckled. "I'm sure there are plenty of Rabbis and Mullahs that will want to take issue with that."

"And the connections between our worlds?" Clancy prompted.

"Like I said before," Fornét continued, "they're like dreams, each one perched on the ones that came before."

Melissa nodded. "Like the layers of the fountain."

"Exactly. And just as susceptible to collapse. If the—"

A sudden knock at the door stopped her in mid sentence. The National Guardsman from the lobby leaned in and smiled at her. "Sorry to have to interrupt, Ms. Fornét, but there's someone in the lobby asking to speak with Mr. Lieber. What with all the disruptions going on this morning, we're not letting uncleared visitors upstairs. So, if you don't mind coming to lobby for a moment, sir?"

Barry excused himself and rose to leave. As he was closing the door behind him, Clancy huffed, and muttered something under his breath.

"Are you all right, Mr. Clancy?" she asked gently.

He glared at her. "If you must know, then no, I'm not all right. I mean, look around! Who do we have left? Two academics, an artist and a mystic! And we're supposed to figure out how Burnout Fever spreads? Give me a god damn break!"

Melissa crossed her arms. "If you don't want to help, then why don't you leave?"

"You know what?" he said, pushing back from the table, "I think I'll do just that. After all, Ms. Fornét here seems to have a corner on the philosophy angle. I don't see much point in having me around anyway."

Without a further word, he grabbed his coat and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

"Okay, ladies," Melissa said into the stunned silence, "I guess it's up to us. How do you want to do this?"

Namidy took a long breath and drummed her fingers a few times. "Well, if there really is something to the subtle guidance we're all supposed to be getting from the entities that dreamed us up, then it seems to me that there must be a reason why it's down to the three of us, something about the mix of perspectives among us that can crack this thing."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. But think about it. The scientists at the CDC have already demonstrated that we're talking about something that doesn't yield to an engineering approach. It's not a purely physical thing."

Fornét shook her head. "I don't follow. If that were the case, then why wouldn't Mr. Clancy be needed? His specialty is philosophy, after all."

"I know, but he goes at it from a purely logical perspective. And he just showed us how inflexible he can be."

"So you're saying that intuition is the common thread among us?"

She grinned. "Yes. I have that feeling. So let's take another look at the problem. We know that individual cases of Burnout Fever are triggered by a failure of the limbic system caused by PanAgra's molecule, and that when this happens, entities lose touch with what they think of as their dream selves – us. If an entity loses touch with enough of these dream selves, it loses the ability to maintain contact with the others, and we get a case of group burnout."

Fornét held up a finger. "One more thing. When the rest of the entity's dream selves vanish, so does the entity."

"Does that mean," Melissa said slowly, her brow tightening, "that the entity's existence in its reality depends on having surrogates in ours? In my spider dream, the web that held me up was secured by the lives at the end of my threads."

"The symbolism matches, so you're probably right. But now you've got me thinking about Schwabe's gravedigger again."

Namidy looked at her curiously.

"Melanie said that she thought the angel kneeling over the gravesite was handing the green flame to him. Now I'm wondering if the old man somehow represents a being that is about to make some kind of transition, that once he takes the flame, he'd be transformed somehow into another angel."

"But wouldn't that imply that the concepts of angel and man are just relative? I mean, if it's just some kind of transition, then the picture could just as easily be about two ranks in the Judaic angel hierarchy. Couldn't it?"

"Don't ask me, Dr. Namidy. You're the expert on religion."

"Forget about that. We're all here as equals. So what do you think?"

"I'm beginning to think that the person we need most is Melanie."

"Why do you say that?"

She turned to Fornét. "Do you remember what Melanie told us about the angels she drew while we were waiting for dessert?"

"Sure. They started out pristine and got progressively dirtier. But what does that—?"

"I think she was drawing the process in reverse. The angels deteriorated up to a point, while the background started to fade in. But then she began drawing the image of a man in a dark room, an image that she first saw in a reflection on a window."

The two women waited uneasily for her to continue.

"Don't you see? The man in the reflection is like the gravedigger. He's the being that turned into the angel. It's the same thing again."

"Okay," Namidy said, "so where do you think that leads?"

"I don't really know. But the symbolism certainly seems to be converging. And that reminds me of something Derek said about Bartholdi's fountain. We'd decided that the layers represented different layers of reality, each supported by and growing out of the ones below it. But then we ended up with two sets of symbolism, and it didn't seem to make much sense. Now, though, I think he was right about that being the whole point; that Bartholdi knew exactly what he was doing. The secret in the crown at the top isn't god at all. It's the living bud of an ever-opening flower that creates a whole cascade of realities. And that makes god a relative term."

"But Melissa," Fornét said gently, "how does that help? How does that get us any closer to an answer to how Burnout Fever spreads, and what to do about it?"

"I'm not sure it does. But if I'm anything close to right, the implications of not stopping it are far more wide-ranging than even Masra may have been willing to admit. I mean, think about it. If there are more layers above Masra's, then if enough entities at her level disappear, wouldn't that cause whatever dreamed them up to drop out of their own network, taking who knows how many entities with it, and even more of us?"

Namidy sat back, dazed. "Talk about the end of the world."

The door opened and Dr. Morales stepped in. "Sorry I'm so late, but—" She stopped short when she got a good look at Namidy. "What's wrong? And where's everyone else?"

"Well, let's see," Melissa said with mock patience. "Derek had an emergency to deal with, Barry had some mysterious visitor down in the lobby, and Mr. Clancy stomped out because you weren't here. We have no idea what happened to Sid or Ezra. Where have you been? Sheralyn had to get a ride from Congressman Fox's neighbor."

Fornét turned her palms up. "What happened? Mrs. Keno said he collapsed and that you took him to the hospital."

She nodded and pulled out a chair. "I did. His doctor said it was another MS flair, but because they'd lost their entire lab staff to Burnout Fever, the only thing they could do was hold him for observation, and keep trying the medication he's been on."

She looked at Melissa. "He's going to be okay. Your Aunt Lilly is keeping him company. Now what did I walk in on? You all looked pretty worried."

Namidy studied her for a moment. "You know all those stories about the end of the world? They don't get close. Every one of them ends with the world itself still here, and just mankind wiped out."

Morales glanced at Melissa and Fornét. "What are you saying?"

"If we don't stop this, the whole planet could just wink out of existence. The groups you've been tracking are nothing compared to what could happen if enough of Masra's community get taken out. We don't have proof, but we're all convinced that our entire reality is in danger. The end of the world won't come with a bang or a whimper. It'll just vanish like a bad dream."

Chapter SIXTY-ONE

Derek reached the curb on the far side of 4th just seconds before a filthy sedan screeched around the corner, missing him by inches. He spun around and raised a fist at the driver. "You had a red light, you moron!"

While catching his breath, he saw his distorted reflection in the tinted glass wall opposite him, and then scanned down the length of the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. Even through the glass, he could see that the crowd in the food court at Wright Café was straining the place's already gargantuan capacity. Gisela has suggested that they meet inside for something hot, and to discuss what to do about the crisis brewing on the Mall.

During museum hours, the café's sidewalk doors were locked, so he continued on past the building's serpentine façade to the main entrance. Ordinarily, the Smithsonian's facilities were

spotless, but like everywhere else these days, Burnout Fever had taken its toll. An impatient crowd surrounded the information desk, where two weary staffers struggled to keep up with shouted demands for information and directions. Several sets of parents loudly threatened their children with one thing or another in a futile attempt to get them to settle down.

"Hey, you!"

Derek turned towards the outburst. An angry patron glared at the nearest parent, a frazzled young man clumsily unwrapping a DuraBar in front of his noisy youngster's face. The kid was mesmerized, his chubby fingers clenching uselessly on air.

As the toddler reached for the candy, the intervening patron grabbed it out of the man's hand and waved it in his face. "What are you doing? Are you nuts? Didn't you hear what the CDC said about these things?"

The man looked fearfully into the patron's eyes, and then down at the boy. "But I don't know what else to do. Besides, he's already got Burnout Fever. It can't hurt him now anyway."

Derek lost sight of them as he swung wide of the scene and doubled back toward the café. When he came opposite the entrance to the second exhibit, a stocky man in a blue warm-up jacket and baseball cap let out a piercing wail and ran directly towards him. The man stopped short a few feet away and spun crazily, his arms flailing in protection from the array of aircraft and satellites that hung overhead. Two uniformed museum security workers converged on him, alternately warning others to stay back and asking him to calm down.

The man turned towards the security team, leaving Derek directly behind him. He raised his arms and glanced apprehensively at the growing ring of onlookers. "I just want to get out of this madhouse!"

"Easy, now." The guard closest to Earth Views, the exhibit that the man had emerged from, took a step closer. The two guards now made the base of a triangle, with Derek at the apex and their quarry in the center.

Derek glanced at the guard, and then at the man's outstretched arms. Even though he was standing still, he continued to wave them rhythmically, his body swaying in the opposite direction to maintain balance. While the guard continued to calm him, Derek nodded once to him and took a step closer.

"What's the problem, sir?" The guard now had the man's full attention.

He whimpered. "I don't know. One moment I was studying the exhibit, and the next I found myself surrounded by all these pictures and planes and spacecraft. Nothing makes any sense around here! They're all different. What's going on around here, anyway?"

While the guard kept him busy, Derek rushed him from behind, grabbed his arms, and held him still.

He struggled vainly. "Let me go!"

"Sir," the guard said calmly, "we can handle this. Please release the man, and we'll escort him to the infirmary."

"I don't know how much you know about Burnout Fever," Derek said, "but this has got to be about the worst place in the world for someone to get it."

"Is that what you think he's got?" the guard asked dubiously as he approached.

"That's right. I just got out of a meeting about it with the Centers for Disease Control a few blocks from here, and—"

The second guard grabbed a plastic wrist tie from his belt and rushed Derek. The frightened tourist started to hyperventilate and broke free. The first guard grabbed his wrist, spun him around, grabbed the other, and snapped the wrist tie on. Meanwhile, the second guard ordered Derek to shut up and put his hands behind his back. A moment later, both men were cuffed, and the ring of onlookers let out a cheer.

Derek tugged at the restraint to see if it felt like the same kind that Isalyn Maufrey had rescued him from at the Senate Hearing, but stopped when the thin plastic tie began to dig into his wrists. "Look, you two," he said, struggling to sound calmly assertive, "I'm serious about that CDC meeting. Call them yourselves. The number is—"

"He's right, you know."

Derek looked around. Rodney had breached the ring of onlookers and stood warily across from him.

"Are you in custody again?" Gisela said from behind him.

"Come on. Get me out of these things!" he grumbled.

The panicked tourist stared at her like she'd just sprouted wings. He turned to the guard

beside him. "I don't know what's worse, the psychotic exhibits around here or what passes for conversation."

While the first guard guided his captive through a growing rift in the audience, the one beside Derek turned to look at Rodney. "Do you know this man?"

"Sure do. That's Derek Boa, the man who testified handcuffed at a Senate hearing a few weeks ago. But he's not really a terrorist. They just thought he was."

Derek gave him a pained look. "Thanks a lot, buddy."

"Pipe down, Derek. I'm trying to save your life here."

"For what, the guillotine?"

He looked at the guard. "What he said was true. We asked him to leave the meeting to help us handle a situation that's developing out on the Mall. Which reminds me. How come you two are still on the job? We spoke with a group of your fellow employees a few minutes ago, and they seem to be holding a work stoppage. According to the leader, a woman named Isalyn, they're trying to get medical coverage for what your other captive just came down with."

Derek chuckled. "You're kidding!"

"About the strike?"

"No. Isalyn Maufrey's the one who got me cleared at the Senate hearing." He looked at the guard. "She has it, too, you know. Burnout Fever. I think that insurance thing is kind of personal for her."

He thought briefly. "Well, if you know about that, then maybe you're telling the truth about that CDC meeting."

"Damn right."

Once the guard had removed Derek's restraint, he told the crowd to disperse, and then headed for the exit.

"Now then," Rodney said, grinning in satisfaction, "does that mean you're picking up the tab? We still haven't eaten, you know."

Derek shrugged and the three headed towards the noisy food park. While they waited in line, their discussion stayed mostly on what had been happening in the restaurant business since late summer. Upscale spots were hit the hardest, of course, since they required more expertise of the kitchen staff, and their servers had to remember not only the menu, but the customers' orders as well.

Places like this put all their money into glitzy technology, like the overhead video menus and custom point-of-sale registers, and they treated staff and customers like Henry Ford treated line workers in his car factories. That was a mixed blessing, though. The clearly defined jobs were easily handled by anyone from an unemployed actor to a neurosurgeon with Burnout Fever, but if the tech they all relied on were to fail, the chain's highly efficient scheme would collapse into chaos.

In the short term, fast food chains were winning. The deteriorating quality of both the food and the service at traditional restaurants was driving more and more business to places like the Wright Café, and they had a growing waiting list for the kind of jobs that people with BF needed to find. In this sector, Burnout Fever had actually been good for business.

As they were getting seated around one of the uncomfortably tiny tables, they got back to the matter at hand. Gisela did most of the talking. Once Derek was up to speed on the dynamic brewing among the competing factions, Rodney waggled a salt-encrusted French fry for attention. "So here's what I've been thinking. The government is pretty much useless at this point, what with all the bureaucrats either getting BF themselves, or losing their staff to it. So even if the multinational corporate lobbies had their act together, which they don't, they wouldn't be able to control things anyway. We've got a bunch of different grass roots groups out on the Mall, all lusting after the chance to fill the power vacuum and start calling the shots themselves. But as long as they're each after their own bit of the pie, none of them are going to get much of anything."

Gisela gazed out the window towards the mall for a moment. "Hey, did you see that?"

Rodney swung around. "See what?"

"I'm not sure. The trees were in the way, but it looked like a fight. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah. You want to organize the organizers, don't you?"

"Sure. How else can we turn this mess around?"

Derek finished the last of his drink. "You know, this whole discussion is giving me flashbacks."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Back at the CDC meeting, we were talking about a hierarchical community of— well, that's not important. Look at it this way: those group cases of BF seem to be like a local activist cell disbanding because the leader loses control. The implication is that the same thing could happen at a higher level, which would be like a whole corporate lobby turning into mush. So your suggestion of creating a new structure built of all those warring factions seems to be the precise countermove."

Gisela chuckled. "See, I told you that teaching you gaming strategy would eventually come in handy."

"Not gaming," Rodney countered, "organization."

Derek swiveled his seat and stood up. "Either way. Come on, let's go see what kind of support we can drum up for the plan."

With their security staff gone, the Air and Space Museum was fast becoming a playground for unruly kids. As they rounded the information desk, a hyperkinetic kid waving a DuraBar wrapper ran headlong into Gisela, lost his footing as he bounced, and tumbled into a knot of unsuspecting tourists. A few minutes later, they were back on the Mall.

"Hold on a minute," Rodney said, raising his arms to slow their progress. "Something's different."

Derek looked around at the scattered gatherings that divided the field like segments of a human stained glass window. "What?"

"I'm not sure." He was still for a moment. "Listen. Do you hear that?"

"Look, I don't have time for a game of twenty questions. I need to get back to the CDC. What is it?"

Gisela nodded. "Yeah. That's him all right."

Derek eyed her angrily. "That's who, god damn it?"

"Malcolm Jeffries."

"Oh great. Things weren't bad enough. Now he's got to turn up as well. All right, where is he?"

She pointed at a gap between two of the groups. "Right there."

Derek nodded and stomped off towards the gap, with Rodney and Gisela close behind. He was still a good twenty yards away when he stopped and took up an aggressive stance. "Jeffries!" he yelled sharply over the din.

The man facing Jeffries turned to look first. Jeffries smiled, and then slowly wheeled around. "Get out of my face, Boa. Can't you see I'm busy here?"

"Oh, I can see that just fine, Malcolm. Are you still on about Burnout Fever? Hadn't you heard that your first love — those evil GMOs — were behind the whole thing? Why don't you go beat up on PanAgra. I'll tell you what, if you do that, I'll even give you a hand!"

"Not a chance, Boa. I get a lot more support this way." He crooked a finger at the crowd standing behind him. "It's quite an army I've built, isn't it?"

"Planning a holy war, are you?"

"I hadn't really thought of it that way, Boa, but thanks for the idea." He pointed to Derek's right. "So who's your new friend? I think I've seen her somewhere."

He knew that Gisela was behind him and a bit to his left, so he turned to see who Jeffries was talking about.

"Hi Derek." It was Amy Gratham. She waved once to Jeffries. "You have. I'm a reporter for DC First News."

Jeffries said something to the man he'd been talking with, and walked towards them.

Gratham waited until he was close enough to not have to shout, and then added, "But I'm off the clock right now, so don't get your hopes up for an interview."

"Don't patronize me. I don't need your help to make the evening news. But then, maybe you hadn't noticed all of the recently damned corporate executives and government bureaucrats heading for the hills lately. Those stories do tend to get buried by your corporate masters, after all."

"That's their problem. I'm more interested in ridding the planet of opportunistic slime like you."

Derek looked askance at her. "Are you sure you want to get dragged into this? It could cost you your job."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about my job, Derek. Getting the rest of these groups together is far more important than the pittance I'm paid for papering over the real news."

"Hey you two," Jeffries said sharply, "could you at least stay focused here?"

Gratham flashed a sly grin before turning towards their inquisitor. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize this was your press conference. Did you have a statement, or should I just tell everyone the truth about you?"

"And what truth might that be?"

"Well, I could start with your medical history, or have you already told your mob there about your stay in the psych ward?"

"My what?"

She laughed. "Or did you want me to just stick with the facts? I really thought about that, but it puts me at big disadvantage where you're concerned."

"Now wait just one minute!"

"Then I have your attention?"

"Yeah. So what do you want, anyway?"

She exchanged glances with Derek and Rodney before answering. "I'd like to make a proposition."

Chapter SIXTY-TWO

"Sergeant Rafferty?"

The National Guardsman looked up from his magazine when Sid approached. "Oh. Hi, Mr. Donahue. If you need to make another satcall, Lieutenant Juarez is on break. He'll be back in a few minutes."

"Thanks, but I need something different this time." He raised the laptop case in his right hand slightly. "That NASA data you helped me get was a life saver. But now that I've finished doing the analysis, I need to get this over to the CDC office on Independence. Can you give me a lift?"

"Sure thing."

Rafferty quickly radioed Juarez, and then led Sid to the Humvee they'd been issued for the assignment. A few minutes later, they left GMU and were heading east on I-66. Traffic was sporadic, which was pretty much normal for the middle of a long holiday weekend, but it came to a complete standstill just as they reached the first sign for the Washington Beltway.

While the guardsman checked the police scanner for a report of any incidents up ahead, Sid pulled out his laptop and woke it up. "The Internet may be worthless for a lot of things right now, but I can still get to the DOT traffic site."

He poked around a bit, and then closed the lid. "This isn't good. The beltway is littered with more accidents than the remaining police and road crews can handle. Some drivers have abandoned their cars. It's tying up all the surrounding roads as well. I think we're stuck."

Rafferty grinned. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. After all, you're a national priority." A few moments later, they were cruising along with one set of wheels on the shoulder, and the other on the grass. A few cars began to follow their lead, but the shoulder behind them quickly devolved into a chaotic mess. He ducked off the highway at the first exit, and used local roads until they were well past the Beltway.

Sid shook his head in amusement as they merged back onto the Interstate. "Where'd you learn to drive like that, anyway?"

"Boston. I hack ambulances when I'm not in uniform. Or rather I used to, before the hospital shut down Emergency Services for lack of qualified staff. If you folks can put an end to this Burnout Fever thing, maybe I'll be able to get my old job back."

Traffic in the Capitol District was a mess as well, but there was no way to get around it, so Sergeant Rafferty used a different ploy — the Humvee's bullhorn. The other drivers might have been frustrated by gridlock, but there was one advantage to the sudden lack of Police presence; people did have a tendency to defer to a military vehicle, especially one whose driver had attitude.

Rafferty turned to look at Sid after pulling into the no parking zone in front of the CDC

building. "Well, that's about as much as I can do for you, Mr. Donahue. The crew in the lobby will have to take it from here. They're friends of mine, so don't hesitate to pester them if you need to make another call."

He chuckled. "That shouldn't be necessary, but thanks anyway."

Rafferty honored him with a salute as he was closing the door, and then whipped the Humvee into the passing traffic. Sid hefted the laptop bag and dashed into the lobby, where he was hastily cleared through security and escorted upstairs. He'd expected to hear something of what was going on inside when they approached the meeting room, but the hallway was eerily silent. About halfway down, the guardsman excused himself and returned to his post in the lobby.

The door swung open just as he was about to grab the handle, and Sheralyn Fornét invited him in. "We're glad you could make it, Sid," she said, beckoning him inside. "We've been waiting for you."

Sid stepped inside and glanced around. "Thanks, but where are Derek and Barry? Weren't they supposed to be here, too?"

Dr. Morales waved him in. "All in good time. For now, we want to hear what you have to tell us. Come on in. Take a seat."

He eyed Fornét curiously as he settled into the empty chair beside Melissa and opened his case. "I'm sorry I'm late, but there were a few problems."

"They're not important. What you came to tell us is, though."

He stopped what he was doing and studied her eyes for a moment. "There are two of you, aren't there."

She nodded. "How did you know?"

"I used to date a multiple. The shrink called it Dissociative Disorder, but Gina was okay with it. Anyway, if you live with someone like that, you get pretty used to recognizing who you're talking to, even when they slide in and out in the middle of a conversation."

"In that case, I'm known as Masra. I believe you've already met my host in this reality context, Sheralyn Fornét." She offered their hand.

He smiled in amusement. "And I'm pleased to meet both of you. But how did you know my name?"

"Sid?" Morales sounded serious. "There's something you should know about Masra. This might not be exactly what you're used to."

"Why? What is it?"

"Remember the angels we were discussing yesterday, the ones that Reverend McQuarry was so interested in?"

"Sure. What about them?"

"You're talking to one."

"Well," Masra/Fornét said lightly, "entity is a more precise term, but that's basically right. I suspect that your friend Gina's alter was probably just a personality fragment."

He laughed. "I wouldn't suggest saying that to her face. She's likely to slice off a few inches. According to her, she lives in a place called Malaar. She tried to show it to me once during meditation, but all I remembered was having to squint a lot."

"Look, both of you," Namidy said, "I'd rather explore the metaphysics of this, too, but right now we've got some more pressing problems to deal with. You know, minor details like the possible destruction of our entire reality. So could we postpone the small talk and get to what you have in your case?"

Sid's enthusiastic grin faded. "All right. On Monday, we talked about scale free networks, and how I used the Internet as a stand-in to experiment with the data. What I ended up with was a theory that there were two such networks involved in the spread of Burnout Fever. Individual cases were spread through a network of people, and the distributed group cases were spread through a hypothetical second network, which was compared to Reverend McQuarry's community of Angels. Yesterday, we talked about there being a hierarchy of these beings, and that got me thinking."

Fornét/Masra raised a finger. "Before you begin, I'd like to clarify something."

Morales shifted in her seat. "Go on."

"There are a number of misconceptions about that so-called hierarchy I'd like to dispel. One thing that it is not is a simple pyramid, with lots of lesser beings at the bottom, and what some people call the Supreme Being at the top. It's far more complex than that, and the structure itself is dynamic."

Sid nodded agreeably. “Okay, but could we take this one concept at a time? That’ll make it easier for me to map it to what I found. So do you mean to say that there is multiple inheritance in this network?”

She shook her head. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry. That’s a software term. What I mean is that a given node in the network — one of the Angels or entities, I guess — is associated with some arbitrary number of what we call parent nodes, other beings that it’s derived from.”

“That’s correct. I suppose you could think of it as if a dream was a collaborative effort, rather than the solo experience that you’re familiar with. I don’t mean to offend anyone, but collaborative dreaming reflects a higher stage of development. It’s harder than doing it alone, like juggling with a partner, and takes a good deal of experience.”

“All right. You also said that it was dynamic?”

“Yes. Another juggling metaphor might help. This would be like one of the jugglers in the team passing a ball to a third person, and relinquishing his role in juggling that one ball. Remember, I’m using the balls to represent dream selves such as each of us. In order for a hand-off like that to occur, the ball, that is, the dream self, must have achieved a certain degree of autonomy apart from the context provided for it by its parent entities.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Morales interjected. “Are you saying that the associations connecting people and the beings in our shadow network keep changing?”

“Exactly.”

“But then there’d be no way to predict who might be affected when a particular entity loses its ability to maintain contact with its dream selves in our world, even if we knew which entity would go next!”

“No more than you could predict which of a person’s circle of contacts would be adversely affected if she got hit by a train. You’re beginning to understand just how complex this all really is. Some of an entity’s extensions — that’s what we call a dream self at any level of development — would be solo efforts, and others might be collaborative ones. If an entity loses its own context, the solo extensions would be left unconnected — what you see as getting Burnout Fever — while the collaborative ones might or might not be affected.”

She turned towards Sid. “Now, then. What was it that you were about to say?”

“I think what I was about to say just got a whole lot more interesting. Talking about the potential collapse of human and entity social networks reminded me of the fault tree analyses that NASA uses to isolate the cause of unexpected failures. What they do is break down all of the possible outcomes of every interaction in the system, and then use it to pare down the universe of causes by eliminating paths leading to results that didn’t happen.

“Anyway, one of the witnesses that spoke to the Columbia disaster board suggested the need for a social fault tree network. She said that because the decision-making process has a lot of hidden social aspects — things like politics and interpersonal relationships — it couldn’t be relied on to produce consistent results. If bad decisions were made, it wasn’t because someone was trying to sabotage the project, but because the process itself was flawed.”

Melissa nodded agreeably. “Constitutional Evolution had pretty much the same idea. Our solution was to set up a conference at which each party to a conflict could learn what the situation was like from each of the others.”

“And for that purpose,” he said, “CE’s solution works admirably. In fact, Derek helped us to use the strategy to work out a problem at GMU. We’re faced with something much deeper here, though. It’s as if the factions in such a meeting were themselves disintegrating.”

Sid glanced around the table. He had everyone’s rapt attention, including both Fornét and Masra.

“After the Columbia board closed their investigation, a small group at NASA decided to see what a social fault tree network would be like, and built a model to experiment with. Thanks to the president’s decision to make our research a national priority, I managed to get my hands on the model. Using the Internet as a base again, I layered on the CDC’s history of Burnout Fever cases, both the individual ones and the groups.

“Now the thing that makes these scale-free networks important is that there’s a wide range of node sizes. In a social network, for instance, there are people with different numbers of immediate contacts. Most of them have only a few, but some have more, and a few have lots of them. If you delete any of the nodes with only a few contacts, nothing much happens. Drop one of the major nodes, and a section of the network goes dark. And under the right conditions, something called

the ‘critical state’, the losses can spread, and even build on themselves until you’ve got an avalanche of unknown size. This could happen to our own social network, or to Masra’s.”

Morales nodded. “All right. So far I’m with you. This fault tree network would be like tracking the spread of a disease through the vectors, but including the possibilities raised by the occurrence of microbial mutations along the way.”

“Good. Now, here’s where we get into trouble. By putting the two ideas together, we can get a feel for what happens when the network gets degraded. If all of the links between nodes — think of them as the relationships between people and their entities — work as expected, then the avalanches are perfectly unpredictable. In other words, in a large sample, you can lay consistent odds on whether a given event might happen. But because the social system itself is degrading, due to the random effects of Burnout Fever, and the uncertainty of whether a given dream self will get BF when its dreamer fails, you can’t even do that. All bets are off.”

Namidy looked down at her splayed hands for a moment. “How do Masra’s clarifications fit into this?”

“I alluded to one effect a moment ago, in that a person whose dreamer drops out might not get BF if there was a co-dreamer involved. On a large scale, though, the phantom network as she described it looks more like the overlapping ripples of a pond in a light rain.”

Melissa huffed. “...or the reflecting pond under the twelve spigots of Bartholdi’s fountain.”

“Sure. But the thing is, I really don’t know how to model something like that.”

Morales leaned forward slightly. “Can you at least tell whether it would be more stable under stress, or more likely to collapse?”

“Not really.”

“In that case, what do we do from here?”

“Well, I can project the probable outcome for a non-dynamic network at the Critical State, if that’s any help.”

“If that’s all we’ve got.”

“I made a projection for our own network, and another for the phantom one, based on some assumptions that may or may not be true. For instance, I don’t know the size of the other network, and I don’t have a full sample, so I don’t know how large the nodes get.”

“That’s okay. We’ll just have to work with what we’ve got.”

“Our own network is still just this side of the critical state, so we have some breathing room. Unfortunately, the way the group cases mapped out, I think we’re looking at a near-certainty of collapse for the entity network. But because of Masra’s clarification, I don’t know what to think.”

Fornét blinked rapidly for a few seconds. “She’s gone.”

Chapter SIXTY-THREE

Barry Lieber lagged behind for a moment to admire the Washington Monument.

State Department liaison Pricilla Karnoy, her dark business suit nearly hidden under a well-worn parka, continued on a few steps along Constitution Blvd. before she realized that he’d stopped. “Getting some sightseeing in, are you?”

“I was just thinking...”

She let the rest of their little band of negotiators continue past while waiting for him to complete the thought. “About what?”

Barry pointed up at the spire. “The monument. It’s like this huge sundial, marking out the hours in our national day in the sun. What we’re about to do... I know it was my idea, but it still seems like we’re marking the end of that day.”

She stepped closer. “Maybe you should think of it more as a transition. After all, even before Secretary Guillen got Burnout Fever, things weren’t going all that well. Congress has been running on fumes for weeks now, and you saw how screwed up the states are when we had that session with Governor Rice’s group.”

He looked glumly at her for a moment, and then stared into the snarled traffic on

Constitution Blvd. "But isn't it like we're just giving up? I mean, the whole point of having a federal government was to separate the business of living from the need to act like the other nations of the world. If we do this, how can we negotiate with other countries?"

"I don't really know, Barry. But as far as I'm concerned, it's the only way to keep the country intact. Let's worry about one thing at a time, all right? So, are you going to do this, or not?"

He shrugged and started walking again. "I suppose."

They hardly said a word for the rest of the way. She hung back with him while the others led on past the museums of American and Natural History, finally catching up outside the National Gallery.

"Well," she said to the group, "this is it. I know that none of you intended to subvert the constitution when you agreed to help State sort out the various messes we've gotten ourselves into, but the assumption that the people elected or appointed to office would be able to meet their responsibilities just hasn't worked out recently. As far as I can tell, we're pretty much it. All of the regulars in State have either gotten Burnout Fever themselves, been killed in a BF-related accident, or gone home to take care of family with it. The executive branch is in ruins from the magnanimity of PanAgra's lobbying efforts, Congress is in permanent recess, and nobody's heard from anyone on the Supreme Court in nearly a month. Even the armed forces are in shambles. About the only people still able to organize anything are the grass roots groups assembled on the Mall. So now, our best bet is to follow Barry's suggestion and organize them somehow. Good luck!"

Barry remained behind when the others fanned out onto the Mall. He gazed at the groups of people gathered in knots across the cold grass. Most of them seemed to be turned inward, their backs to the groups surrounding them. A few were arrayed against one another, brandishing signs, as if this were a medieval field of battle. He'd just started to walk towards one of these standoffs when he thought he recognized someone, a profoundly short woman with a heck of an attitude, and picked up the pace.

As he got closer, he started picking out bits of conversation. The woman who'd spoken for the passengers on his flight to DC shook her head in amusement and raised three fingers to the much taller man opposite her. "That's right, Jason," she said, "you need three parts to make a tautology. Specious arguments like that just fall flat on their face because there's nothing to support them. I'll tell you what, if you really want the chance to present your case at the next Senate hearing, make an appointment with my secretary and I'll help you craft an argument guaranteed to work."

"I'm afraid there's not much point in that anymore, Miss...?"

When she turned toward the interruption, her sudden look of annoyance vaporized. She nudged the woman beside her. "Hey, it's that in-flight entertainment I was telling you about. So Lieber, did you ever get to your meeting with the CDC?"

"Yeah." He hesitated. "Look, you seem to be in charge of the group behind you, and we wanted to organize a bit of a conference out here."

"Who's 'we'?"

"What's left of the State Department."

"State? I thought you flew in to speak with the CDC."

"It's a long story. Anyway, I never caught your name."

"I'm not surprised. I never threw it. But here's a gift: I'm Irene Salic. Now, what can I do for you?"

"You can start by telling me what your group is out here for today."

"Well, for one thing, to convince the jerks in Congress that they were off their nut when they permitted the tech sector to abandon their contract workers en masse without so much as a warning. We know the jobs are at the employer's whim, but putting a whole sector of the economy on the streets in order to hide what's really going on is a pretty nasty way to do business."

"I'd heard about that. My wife's a contract writer in the marketing sector, or at least she was until she got BF a few months back. But really, that law was passed after most members of congress were either suffering from Burnout Fever themselves, or had lost the bulk of their staff to it. It's one of the reasons we're out here today."

Salic considered for a moment. "Why, do you plan to sack Congress or something?"

"There's not much point. They're on permanent recess, so the hearing you offered to prep your friend here for isn't going to happen."

"In that case, I'm lost. What does the State Department have to do with any of this?"

"Nothing, normally, but it seems that the crew of negotiators that the few remaining people

from State managed to recruit are the only thing keeping the country together anymore. We're the reason why Governor Rice called off his ill-considered rebellion."

"Then what do you need us for?"

"It's not just you, Irene. It seems that grassroots organizations are the only kind that still works."

She laughed. "That's not exactly a secret, you know. Or did you miss that entertaining Senate hearing when the PanAgra lobbyist went BF in the middle of a sentence? The guy they brought in afterwards — the one who kept rattling his handcuffs at the senators like he was in a drummers circle — laid it all out for them."

"Yeah. I know," Barry said with a pained expression. "Derek's the one who asked me to fly out to DC."

"All right. So spill it. What do you want? What's this conference all about?"

"I suppose you could call it a kind of ad hoc government."

She shook her head. "I don't know. That's kind of a useless strategy as long as the people you're trying to serve are still in chaos. What about them?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I might. Look, the fact that the groups out here are still intact demonstrates that the real power comes from the bottom, not from the top. So maybe we can do something to strengthen what's left of the working class. There's plenty of available labor out there, but it's mostly going to waste because the idiots left in management can't see past their own noses. So we cut them out of the equation and focus directly on the workers themselves. If there are jobs they're comfortable doing, even the ones with Burnout Fever, then they'll become part of what still works."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Have you been in any of the fast food joints lately? They've become a haven for people with BF because they provide well-defined jobs that don't confuse them. The same strategy can be made to work in other areas, but it'll take a lot of work. Someone would have to collect the process knowledge and redefine the jobs that exist so more of them can be performed by people with BF. We'll need a horde of interviewers, writers and information architects, though, and most of them, at least the ones that haven't fallen to BF yet, are looking for work right now."

Barry laughed. "Solves your own problem, too, doesn't it."

A familiar voice spoke quietly in his ear. "Well, it's about time."

He looked to see who it was. Amy Gratham grinned appreciatively, and turned towards another part of the Mall. She waved her arms over her head and called out to Derek. A few seconds later, he emerged from the midst of a nearby crowd, followed closely by Rodney and Gisela.

"I'm glad we found you, Barr," Derek shouted as he approached. "When I left the CDC Meeting to deal with this mess—"

"Hey," Salic said suddenly, "you're the guy from that Senate hearing, aren't you, the one with the cuffs? That was a great speech you gave."

He looked blankly at her for a moment, and then continued with his thought. "—we were just getting into the symbolic stuff. What happened after that?"

"Clancy left in a huff after you walked out. Oh yeah, Dr. Morales finally arrived. It seems that Congressman Fox had an MS flare-up this morning and she took him to the hospital in Virginia. Melissa's Aunt Lilly is keeping him company for now."

Rodney arrived a few seconds before Gisela. "Cut the small talk. What's going on? We were just invaded by a bunch of people claiming that they're from the State Department."

"They are. Or they would be if there still were a State Department. Look, we came out here to try to organize this rabble into a de facto government." He gestured at Salic. "But Irene here had a better idea: a concerted effort to preserve the knowledge base while we can, and turn it into jobs that even people with BF can handle. Sort of a national grassroots project."

Gisela pointed across the mall. "Well, unless you plan on calling off your dogs, I think we've already got one. Look!"

The randomness that had surrounded them a few moments earlier had begun to fade into the kind of unified front that challenged the Bush Administration over the second Gulf War. For a brief moment, he fought the smile that threatened to devour his face, and then gave into it. "Great. Someone go tell them all to send a representative so we can get this movement in gear."

Chapter SIXTY-FOUR

Julian McKnight felt old, and suspected that he was finally beginning to look it as well. He'd spent Thanksgiving at his sister's, and got a taste of how much trouble she'd gone through to keep the truth about Warren's condition quiet. He'd been grilling his nephew Peter about his plans for a career in stand-up when the movie Warren was watching was interrupted by the CDC's announcement about PanAgra's role in causing Burnout Fever.

Lauren hadn't said a word. She just turned ever so slowly and glared. It was the worst day of his life.

He'd given up on sleep by dawn, so he dressed quietly and went out for a long walk. By lunchtime, after a few aimless subway trips, he'd managed to find his way into the capitol district. As he walked the litter-heaped streets, he thought about all the people he'd thought he was helping by supplying them with chocolate to get them through the extra shifts. He'd made a special point of remembering their names and faces, and now they haunted him.

The hospitals he'd brought DuraBars to, the ones that Grznowski had sweet-talked into letting him schmooze the staff for contacts, were the worst. He stood outside an emergency room and looked up at the grimy windows on the upper floors. Hospital workers weren't the only people he'd hurt. Patients had been put at risk as well, and because of all the uncollected garbage, lax procedures and filthy equipment, even the people visiting them.

But what could he do? PanAgra had been responsible for developing the product, after all. All he did was craft a plan to repair their public image and get product into peoples' hands. But that just made things worse.

A gentle beep from his hip startled him. Cell phone service had been restored, at least for a while. He unclipped it and asked for CDC headquarters in Atlanta. Fortunately, someone was there.

"Yes. I'd like to speak with someone about the Burnout Fever research effort."

After explaining his situation, he waited for the call to be transferred. A few people later, he had his answer. There was something he could do, but first he had to speak with Dr. Morales at the CDC office on Independence Avenue.

The Guardsman in the lobby was on the phone when he entered, but excused himself and warily approached, one hand hovering by his weapon. "I'm sorry sir, but the CDC offices are off-limits to unclear visitors at the moment."

"I think they're going to want to see me."

"And why is that, sir?"

"I pretty much caused the mess we're in."

He took a step closer, and brushed the butt of his gun with his thumb. "What mess is that sir?"

"Burnout Fever. PanAgra may have made the chocolate bars, but I made sure there was an unlimited supply for a large number of infrastructure workers. They were hit pretty hard as a result."

He relaxed a bit, and signaled McKnight to approach the information desk. "Wait here, sir. I'll go ask Dr. Morales if she wants to speak with you."

A few minutes later, the guardsman returned, and escorted him to an upstairs conference room. He knocked twice, and then turned to go. McKnight waited nervously for a while, and sighed in relief when it finally swung open.

"Thank you for coming to speak with us, Mr. McKnight. I'm Dr. Morales. Please come in."

He nodded, glanced at the three women seated around the table, and took a seat beside the lone man with an open laptop.

Morales closed the door and sat across from him. "Now, then, Mr. McKnight. You had something to say?"

He swallowed uncomfortably. "Yes, that's right. It seems I helped to cause this mess, and I'd like to do what I can to fix it. A great number of cases of Burnout Fever were caused by my public relations work on behalf of PanAgra. I arranged for infrastructure workers across the country to have an unlimited supply of DuraBars, including the security workers at federal buildings in the District, to help get them through the stress and the extra shifts. Unfortunately, that plan seems to have backfired."

Sid cleared his throat. "I'll say it has. Do you have the faintest idea just how serious this problem really is?"

He rolled his chair back a few inches. "I guess not."

"Well, let me tell you something, then." Sid's face reddened. "There's more than just the world at stake here—"

Morales rapped the table. "Sid!"

He frowned. "All right."

"Mr. McKnight, let's just say that there's more to what's happening out there than just the effects of PanAgra's time release molecule. Tracking and predicting the spread of cases has been very difficult."

"All right. Look. What little I know about disease vectors, I read in a newsmagazine, so I'm not likely to understand much of what you're doing. But there is something I can do. On my way over here, I called PanAgra and told them to pull DuraBar out of the distribution channels. I also learned that they have the means to block the action of the molecule after it's been ingested. What they don't have is a way to get it to the people who need it. That's why I came here. Don't worry about the cost. PanAgra will foot the bill. I convinced them that it might help to salvage their reputation. So what do I do? Who do I talk to?"

Melissa laughed at the irony. "Actually, I think you've already met one of them." She suddenly got very serious. "Hey, didn't you just say you called PanAgra?"

"Sure. My cell service came back on a while ago. Why?"

"Because ours are all down again. Which service do you use?"

He shrugged. "It's a small Seattle-based outfit with spotty service. Just metro areas like DC."

"Can I borrow your phone for a moment? I want to try something."

He unclipped his phone and handed it to her.

She punched up a number and held the unit to her ear. A moment later, she smiled and nodded. "Hi, this is Melissa. There's someone here that needs to speak with you and Derek. He is? Great. Hold on a moment."

Chapter SIXTY-FIVE

Barry glanced around at the dozens of grass roots groups surrounding him on the Mall, taking note of where his fellow negotiators were, while waiting for Melissa to hand someone the phone.

"Hello?"

He straightened. The voice was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"This is Julian McKnight, of Hennessey, McKnight and Giulliano."

Barry mouthed the name, a mischievous leer on his face.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

"So... how was your flight out from Seattle? Anything interesting happen?"

The line was silent for a moment. "Um, who is this?"

"Your seatmate. Barry Lieber. Was there something you wanted?"

"Actually, I think there's something I can do to help."

Barry lowered the phone at the sight of Pricilla Karnoy, his State Department recruiter, backing out of a nearby gathering with her arms raised for protection. He took a few steps closer and raised the phone again.

"Hello? Mr. Lieber? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"I've learned that PanAgra ChemCo has a treatment, of sorts. They have something that will bond with the molecule causing Burnout Fever, rendering it harmless for people who have already eaten some DuraBars, but they don't have any way to get it distributed. I'm told that you might be able to help."

A second person emerged from the crowd, a heavysset woman in a uniform. She was yelling something at Karnoy and gesturing wildly, but he was too far away, and there was too much other noise to make anything out.

"Look, Mr. McKnight. I've got a crisis on my hands right now. Can we do this in person? I'm not far from you, down on the Capitol Mall, between the National Gallery and the Air and Space

Museum. Enough people should know who I am by the time you get here, so just ask around. Gotta go.”

He stowed the phone and stalked off towards Karnoy. As he approached, he realized that the entire crowd now facing her was uniformed. Whoever these people were, they were definitely not like any of the other groups on the Mall.

The uniformed woman crossed her arms and struck a defiant pose. “Look, I spoke with some of your people hours ago, and told them the exact same thing. We’re not interested in any kind of power grab. All we’re after is medical coverage for the cost of dealing with Burnout Fever.”

Karnoy looked at her incredulously. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We just got here. You couldn’t have spoken with any of us hours ago!”

“Well, I did. And I’m still not interested in talking with you, so get out of here. Now!”

By the time Barry reached her, she was speechlessly shaking her hands in the air. “What’s going on, ‘Cil?”

“I wish I knew. She thinks she talked to us hours ago, but that’s not possible.”

He glanced around the Mall. “Not necessarily. Hold on a minute.” Then he cupped his hands and shouted into the crowd. “Excuse me. Ma’am? Before we go, I’d like to ask one last question.”

The crowd parted, revealing the woman, who slowly turned around and glared. “What?”

“I think I may be able to clear up this misunderstanding. Could you please describe the people you said you’d spoken with earlier?”

She took a step towards him. “Sure. There were two of them: a black guy and a redhead. Are you done now?”

He grinned, barely controlling his amusement. “Thank you. I think I know what happened.”

“Good. Now leave us alone.”

“Would it change anything if I told you that the people you spoke with are friends of Derek Boa? You might remember him from the Senate hearing — the guy in the handcuffs. I think you saved his life. Well, his career, anyway.”

She blinked a few times, visibly struggling to put the pieces together. “Wait a minute. Derek’s friends? Who are you?”

He stepped towards her and offered his hand. “I’m Barry Lieber. The two people you spoke with earlier are Rodney Falk and Gisela Kilarney. And this...” he swung his arm around “is Pricilla Karnoy from what used to be the State Department.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

Julian McKnight slackened his pace in surprise when he rounded the arboreal buffer that separated the Capitol Mall from the Air and Space Museum. Looking down the greensward towards the Washington Monument, he saw the human equivalent of a major trade show. People were clustered across the lawn in groups of various sizes, huddled together like they were watching a demonstration or listening to a sales pitch. He stepped closer to one, so he could hear what was going on.

“Don’t give me that line of shit, Malcolm!” a husky voice shouted from somewhere in the crowd. “It wasn’t that long ago that you would’ve been out here with us, instead of carrying on like some whacked-out sidewalk messiah.”

He slowed to listen.

“Whacked-out sidewalk messiah, am I!? Listen, you asshole, damning all those people wasn’t exactly my idea. If you’ve got a bone to pick with God, then be my guest — go knock down the pearly gates and call him out on it. But don’t come running to me if you come back with your brain fried.”

“Stop it, both of you!” a strident voice demanded. “Now, can we get back to the subject here? You know as well as we do how dangerous GMOs are, right Malcolm?”

From where McKnight stopped, he could see a sliver of the action through the crowd. The new speaker was a bundle of nerves, constantly adjusting her stance as if there were stones in her

shoes.

"Of course I do Emily," Jeffries said derisively, "but this has nothing to do with GMOs. You heard the CDC; they were only used to make the crap. If you want to take advantage of the situation, focus on the real problem."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"I don't know why I spent all that time training you. If you're ever going to get any leverage from this, you need to focus on the effects, not the cause. People don't care why it happened. Biochemistry may sway a few minds, but to get their hearts in your court, you need to go with the pain. But enough of this; I came here to put you all on a better path, one that's been paved for us by God almighty."

"Give it a rest, Malcolm." It was husky-voice again. Seconds later, the crowd parted and a very annoyed-looking man stormed off towards the street.

"Now then. I'd like the rest of you to join me on a crusade to cast out the unworthy and bestow the honor of followers on the righteous. God has struck down the unwilling with Damnation Fever to make way for true believers who follow his path and play the roles he has written for them."

McKnight pushed his way through the crowd. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but there's one thing I can tell you for certain: the people you so casually disregard are not damned. They're sick, and there's a cure."

Jeffries glared at him. "Right. Sure there is. And how would you know?"

"I know because I'm responsible for causing all of this in the first place."

He laughed haughtily. "You mean you're God?"

"No, you imbecile. I'm the guy who laid out the marketing plan for PanAgra, the guy who made sure all of the infrastructure workers got all they could eat, the guy who's responsible for making the world's businesses and governments a shambles."

Jeffries brightened and stepped closer. "In that case, sir, I'd like to shake your hand!" He extended his arm.

McKnight knocked it away. "What are you blathering about?"

"You're one of God's elite. You've helped to steer mankind back towards the path of righteousness."

"It was wrong!"

"No sir. It was right. It was God's will."

"Sure. And I suppose it was God's will that you should take advantage of their misfortune, that you should be the one to decide who those true believers are?"

Jeffries nodded slowly. "Indeed it is. And that's why people the world over have joined me in this holy work of exposing the damned for what they are."

"Exposing the damned?" McKnight's eyes widened. "You're responsible for outing all those executives?"

"You bet I am." He gestured at the growing crowd surrounding them. "And the people helping me? Activists: people with a need to do something that makes a difference. People like this!"

McKnight wheeled, meeting faces in the crowd, faces that reflected a growing excitement, a common interest in the mission that Jeffries was laying out for them. He tensed, breath dry in his throat. The thought of his sister finding out how close he'd gotten to the man who threatened her husband's reputation sent his heart racing. He shook his head darkly and turned, pushing his way through the growing crowd until he was back in the open.

"Hey, don't I know you?" said a woman to his right.

He turned to look, and noticed she was wearing hospital orderly blues.

"Damn!" She grimaced, and then turned to yell. "Hey Irene! He's over here! McKnight — the DuraBar guy! The one who got us all fired!"

McKnight backed away, and had just started running along the walkway when the path ahead was blocked by a formation of uniformed security people coming towards him.

The leader pointed at him. "We've got a bone to pick with you!"

He dashed right, across the lawn, but when he glanced over his shoulder to see if they were following, he hit something and tumbled to the ground. Shaking the pain from his head, he started to push himself up, but froze when a small pair of shoes stopped in front of him. He looked up.

"I'd advise you not to challenge them, Mr. McKnight. It would only make things worse for you."

He stared at her, uncomprehendingly.

"Oh, sorry" she said, handing him a business card. "My name is Irene Salic."

He took it and got to his feet just as the heavy woman leading the security group stopped in front of him.

She raised a finger for emphasis. "We have a bone to pick with you. Because of you, a lot of my friends have lost their jobs, and the company refuses to cover their medical expenses."

He studied her briefly. "You work at the Dirksen Building, don't you? Look, I'm sorry. I had no way of knowing that there was anything wrong with the chocolate. PanAgra assured me that there weren't any GMOs in them, and that they were perfectly safe. I've even eaten them myself. I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused — doubly so since my own brother-in-law was one of the people who got Burnout Fever because of me. But there's something we can do about it. PanAgra knows how to stop this from spreading, and I need to find Barry Lieber so we can get the cure distributed. So, please, don't hurt me, okay?"

She stared at him for a long moment. "Why would I want to hurt you? What would that accomplish?"

chapter sixty-seven

Jeffries paused to take in the crowd, smiling at the rapt expressions of support surrounding him. McKnight's blunder had been a stroke of luck too good to pass up, and he was determined to make the most of it.

"You all saw it, how the man responsible for placing us on this path came to me just now. He is a perfect example of how people step on and off of God's master plan. While he was playing the role that God had assigned him to, he unquestioningly performed the tasks set for him by the almighty, laying the groundwork for the mass exposure of faltering players that I have told you about. People from around the world have joined me in this important work, and I expect no less of you."

He paused for effect. "But there's something I want to know. How many of you are here for personal reasons? How many of you are here because Damnation Fever has removed someone that was blocking your way? A show of hands, please."

About a third of the crowd responded, some proudly, others timidly.

Jeffries made cursory eye contact with several of them. "All right then. After God struck them down, how many of you stepped into the role that they had vacated?"

A scattered few hands remained.

"Good. Congratulations. You're the people that God has chosen to put in their place, and I'm honored to be in your presence today. Everyone give them a round of applause!"

While they were congratulating one another, Rodney Falk elbowed through the crowd and stopped a few feet away. He took a solid stance and stared angrily, arms crossed in defiance.

Jeffries quieted the crowd. "As for the rest of you, I say to you now: if you want a piece of the action, you must follow God's lead and help me. Help me to expose the rest of the damned who are still out there. The ones who are hiding behind lies and being protected by people like this man here. Once all of the damned have been identified and removed, and the final chapter of God's great drama is underway, there will be plenty of room for the faithful — for each of you — to play a significant role in what is to come."

Rodney smirked. "You mean like getting a front row seat for the end of the world? Who do you think you are, the captain of the Titanic? That jerk preacher you claim to follow was fixated on the end of the world, and you're just trying to drum up a legion of followers of your own."

"I told you before, Falk — get out of my face!"

"You are so predictable, Malcolm. No matter what happens, you always find some way to make it work for you." He turned to address the crowd. "Listen, all of you! Burnout Fever is a disease. This has nothing to do with God, and Malcolm Jeffries is nothing more than a petty opportunist riding the crest of a wave of disaster. He..."

chapter sixty-eight

Lillian Haekson sank back in the bedside chair, a dazed expression on her face.

"Lilly?" Fox's speech was still slurred due to his early-morning MS flare. "What's wrong?" He struggled to reach her, but fell against the pillows in frustration. "I'll get help." He fumbled for the green plastic puck with the NVNI logo, pressed the nurse's call button and stared anxiously at his friend.

A moment later, she exhaled and looked at him. "Something just happened, Arthur. I don't know what it was, but something feels different."

"What?"

"I don't know. I was wondering what it must be like to not be able to speak clearly, what it would feel like to be in your position right now, when something vanished."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. But I do know one thing: I can't do it any more."

"Do what?"

"I can't imagine what it would be like to be in your place. When I try, nothing happens."

chapter sixty-nine

"No-o-o-o-o-o!" Melanie screamed as she pressed into the corner of the dimly lit lab, her arms wrapped in fists, her eyes squeezed shut in panic. "Not again! Make it stop! Make it stop!"

Ronnie stood a few feet away, gesturing for calm. "But I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong."

"What happened?" Ezra Silas said quietly from behind him.

"I don't know. One minute she was reading a progress report from Iris' mother, and the next... this. She just suddenly dropped the fax and ran in here."

Melanie struggled for breath and opened her eyes. "She's gone, Ronnie. I can't feel her anymore."

"Who's gone? Is it Iris? Tell me."

"Iris. Yeah. She's not there." She spun around, waved her hands in the air for a moment, and then pounded her chest. "In here. I can't feel her in here."

He glanced over his shoulder at Silas, and noticed that several other members of the team had joined them. "She uses Iris as a touchstone. That's why she wanted to name this place. It's an empathic link, I guess."

The green-eyed woman came up beside him, and she looked distraught. "It's not just Melanie," she whispered.

"What?"

"I can't do it either. None of us can. Try it yourself."

Ronnie closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked at her, aghast. "You're right. I can't feel Al either."

chapter seventy

Sid threw up his hands in disgust. “But how is that possible?”

“Hey, you’re the analyst,” Fornét said weakly. “All I’m suggesting is that the only reasonable explanation for all of us losing the ability to directly empathize at once is some sort of change to the common dream context that we’re all sharing.”

Melissa signaled for a time-out. “Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. You’re suggesting that somehow, one of the principal co-creators of this reality just lost its connection to the thing, and that caused a whole aspect of reality to just vanish? Like, um...” she cast about for a moment, “like one of Bartholdi’s sea nymphs wandering off for a smoke?”

“Yes. Look, I don’t know how the topology of reality creation works, but according to Masra, each of the entities that contribute to the stability of a shared context like this brings certain traits with it. If it were a painting, I guess you could say they each came with some of the colors. But in any case, if any of them gets disconnected from the reality they created, whatever it was that they added to it goes away as well.”

Sid shrugged. “Like the red electron gun in a color TV tube?”

“I suppose.”

Namidy glanced out the window. “That just seems too simple. What else was affected? What if there are other manifestations of whatever this entity brought to the table?”

“All right,” Sid said, yielding to the argument, “let’s say it’s true for the moment. How would the ability to model another person’s feelings be expressed in nature? What does it look like in biology; in chemistry; in physics, for that matter? Is there something we can test?”

Morales shut her eyes. “You’re not going to like this. What if... what if the ability for us to model another person’s feelings is similar to an organism’s ability to self-replicate? What if that got damaged as well?”

Melissa drew back. “I don’t think I want to know.”

chapter seventy-one

“What the hell is going on out here?” Barry asked Derek as they crossed the lawn towards McKnight.

A wave of — something — had come over the crowd, that much was obvious. For a moment, everyone had stopped whatever they were doing, and the sea of strident voices subsided under a rising wave of car horns from the cross-streets. A moment later, most of the signs that had been brandished in support of the various issues stopped waving over the scattered knots of people, and then were dropped on the grass.

“Whatever it is, it’s not just a case of group burnout.” Derek hooked a thumb at the fragmenting environmental group they were passing. “I know these folks, and it’s not like them to just walk off like that.”

Barry slowed. “There were some, though.” He cast around the field. “Look — there’s one, and there. Odds are there’s a lot more, too.”

Ahead, Julian McKnight stood beside Isalyn Maufry, her knot of displaced security workers apparently unaffected by whatever had caused all of the grassroots groups to feather out. He held out his arm. “Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Lieber. I’m really sorry about what happened to Ms. Stroub, but I had no way of knowing that she was still sick when she came for that job.”

“There’s time for that later. You said you had a cure?”

“That’s right. PanAgra has a molecule that will bond with the thing that caused all of this trouble, but they don’t have any way to get it to all the people with Burnout Fever.” He glanced around nervously. “But there’s something else going on now, isn’t there.”

“Yeah,” Derek interrupted. “What took you so long to get here anyway?”

He turned to look behind him, and nodded towards a group that appeared to still be intact. “I stopped to ask them for directions, like you suggested, but got into an argument with some idiot

calling it Damnation Fever, or some such nonsense.”

They looked at one another. “Jeffries.”

Priscilla Karnoy joined them. “Sorry to interrupt, but do either of you two have any idea why his was the only group out here that still seems to be intact?”

“Not yet. Do you have a lead on what just happened?”

“I think that reporter —”

“Amy Gratham?” Derek prompted.

“Yeah. She had an idea about it. It seems that the ones that left didn’t have a personal stake in their issue. But what could cause them all to lose interest like that?”

“Whatever it was,” Karnoy said, “it also killed any chance of using an emotional ploy in negotiations. Three of my people stopped me on the over here to report the same thing.”

“Hey!” McKnight chirped. “What about getting the cure out? Have you forgotten why you asked me down here?”

Derek frowned. “No. But we were relying on the ability of these grassroots groups to remain intact, despite the fact that governments and corporations are in shambles. That was the key to the distribution network. But after what just happened, the only group that still seems to be viable is the one trying to make trouble for us.”

“Wait a minute. There still may be a way.” Barry said suddenly, turning to stare at Jeffries’ mob. “You told me that he was an opportunist, right?”

“Sure. Why?”

“...and that he doesn’t believe a word of the crap he’s spouting?”

“Yeah. So get to point already.”

Barry crossed his arms and smiled. “So we turn him. We offer him what he wants. Power. He’ll be the man who saved the world. Whatever it takes, as long as we get to use his minions to do our work.”

Karnoy nodded agreeably. “Okay. So how can we help?”

“Round up what’s left of the State Department, and gather in a mob about ten paces west of Jeffries’ group.”

“Done.” She turned and trotted back across the lawn.

He glanced at the Washington Monument, smiled in amusement, and turned to Isalyn. “Ms. Maufry, can I enlist the help of some of your co-workers?”

“Sure. Whatever you need.”

“I’d like 12 of your people to surround the two groups in a large circle, to give us a clear area to work in.”

Derek cocked his head. “You’re not turning this into a magical thing, are you?”

“Of course I am. You want it to work, don’t you?”

chapter seventy-TWO

Sid entered the conference room first, followed by the National Guardsman from the lobby.

“Well?” Morales said. “Can you do it?”

The guardsman handed her the satphone. “One way or another, ma’am. Everyone should be in place. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything else.”

“Thanks.” She glanced hopefully at the others and dialed Atlanta. “Wish me luck.”

After a brief flurry of jargon-filled banter, she paused and steadied herself. “I’m not sure how to explain this. We have a theory that might explain both of the spread patterns as well as whatever it was that just happened, but it’s not something we’ve ever dealt with before. One of the people at our GMU team modeled the group cases as the failure of a kind of phantom network.”

She listened for a few seconds. “No, nothing like that. It’s more... um, metaphysical. Anyway, the upshot is that there may be a way to verify it. Whatever caused the psychological effects may also be expressed biologically. Yeah, I know there’s no scientific basis for it, but I think we’re dealing with something that transcends science. So here’s what I need you to do. The consensus

here is that the loss of emotional connections we've experienced maps to biology as a failure of self-replication. This can be expressed either in terms of reproduction, or self-similarity, like the shapes of leaves on a tree. Choose examples with a rapid replication rate, and see if they're true. If they're not — if we're getting mutations, there's going to be hell to pay."

"The National Guard has arranged satphone linkups for the remaining teams, so spread the word and get this going in parallel. The sooner we know, the better off we'll be. Thanks."

Chapter seventy-three

Barry took a deep breath, his eyes closed against the chill and commotion of the capitol mall. Focusing intently on the sound and feel of his heartbeat, he brought himself to a peaceful state of meditation.

He imagined himself standing alone on an empty, moonlit field of soft grass, a gentle breeze rustling his long, black cape. Lifting his gaze from the shimmering glints of reflected light at his feet to the open face of the full moon, he raised his empty hands, fingers spread wide. "I pay honor to the God and to the Goddess, to the forces of Light and of Darkness, mystical opposites whose interactions are the basis of all life. I yield to the Moon, potent symbol of illusion and ambiguity, and of the reflection that reveals truth. I yield to the blazing yet hidden Sun that fuels it and gives those insights meaning. I come before you today in perfect love and perfect trust, to seek your guidance for the work that lies ahead."

He lowered his arms, and as he closed his right hand a staff materialized within it, it's insubstantial weight and texture familiar from long use. He held its striped ebony body just below the intricately woven brass head, and gazed into the glowing crystal that shimmered within. Straightening his arm, he slowly turned around, sighting past the crystal to create a broad ring of protection on the grassy plain. As he did so, fiery winged guardians faded into view one after another until he was surrounded, bathed in their light.

Barry raised the staff in greeting and looked off into the hazy distance. "Guardians of the East, protectors of the forces of Air, and of the intellect, I bid you welcome." The fiery forms before him brightened, and flexed their wings in reply. Behind them, a vast domed building emerged from the mist.

Turning to his right, he continued, "Guardians of South, protectors of the forces of Fire, and of the Imagination, I bid you welcome." Again, the guardians responded, and as they did, an intricate labyrinth appeared behind them.

"Guardians of the West, protectors of the forces of Earth, and of the ground of our being, I bid you welcome." This time, a towering spire arose from beneath the grass.

"Guardians of the North, protectors of the forces of Water, and of —" he hesitated, "—of inspiration, I bid you welcome." But instead of flexing their wings, the guardians just stood there, and the sculpture garden that began to appear behind them didn't solidify. He peered at it for a moment, until he realized that the sculptures themselves were ill formed.

He shook off the chill running up his spine, and steadied himself. His focus had slipped, and sounds from the mall were seeping into his realm — catcalls from in front of him, and indignant replies from behind.

"Hey Boal!" It was Jeffries. "What's with the circle of goons?"

A tap on his shoulder. "Listen, Barry buddy," Derek said quietly in his ear, "you'd better do whatever it was you had in mind. Things are falling apart out here."

He nodded and opened his eyes. Jeffries had emerged from the mob and was approaching. The circle of guardians had traded their wings for uniforms. He glanced over his shoulder at the State Department negotiators, towards the tree-shrouded museums to his left and right, and at the Capitol Dome looming in the distance over Jeffries' mob.

"This all seems to be your doing."

Barry smiled. "You're right. I wanted to talk with you, and this seemed like a good way to get your attention."

Jeffries glanced disapprovingly at the tableau. "It's a bit melodramatic, don't you think?" He shrugged and sidestepped just enough to escape the man's line of sight. "Why do you say that? Does it make you nervous?"

"Don't be a jerk like your friend Boa." Jeffries compensated, closing the gap slightly. "I've got a worldwide organization behind me. Why should I be nervous?"

There was a rustle of feet as a few of the State Department crowd drifted clockwise for a better view.

"I don't know. Derek told me that you were a pretty religious guy, used to doing things in a particular way, that's all."

He laughed. "Right. And a fat lot Boa knows."

"Come on, be honest with me. This is a religious crusade you're on, isn't it? I mean you've got thousands of people busy, all over the world, doping out who's damned and who's not. Seems pretty religious to me, anyway." He shuffled clockwise again.

"What's with you, anyway?" Jeffries matched him. "Would you stand still for a minute? Come on; get to the point already. I don't have all day. What do you want?"

This time, after the negotiators oozed clockwise, Jeffries mob followed suit. Both groups had begun to look like paisleys, bulbous at one end and tapering at the other, a mirrored pair of apostrophes flanking the two men. Barry smiled; from above, it would look like a yin-yang. He spoke quietly. "It's very simple, really. We need your help."

Jeffries stepped closer. "Who's 'we'?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce you. This is what's left of the State Department."

"Yeah. I know. They've been like a plague of locusts out here today. What about them?"

Barry drifted a final step clockwise. He was now facing south, towards the Air and Space Museum. "We have a problem, and we believe that your organization can help. There's a way to stop the effects of Burnout Fever."

Jeffries shook his head. "Damnation Fever."

"Whatever. There's a way to stop it, and your people have already identified a large number of those affected."

"So what? Do you expect me to help you pervert God's plan; to help them escape damnation? Why would I do that?"

Barry shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe for the same reason you gave up protesting GMOs a few months ago: power."

"Power." Jeffries parroted, and gazed towards the National Gallery. "What kind of power?"

"Then we're just talking price, now?"

"I'm waiting."

"Look, I don't care whether it's a disease or God's will. The fact is that as bad as things seem right now, they're going to get a hell of a lot worse if we don't stop the spread of it. Without the ability to shift contexts — and that's what Burnout Fever does to you — pretty soon there won't be anyone around to keep the things you depend on going. No food. No water. No power. No clothes. No government."

Jeffries shrugged. "What, and that's a bad thing?"

"It is when you consider all the weapons systems at stake. Acts of terror — like releasing T2 in the Rayburn Building — take planning. Accidents — like Secretary Guillen's plane crashing into the beltway — don't. Every time another person succumbs to Burnout Fever, the world comes that much closer to annihilation. Just imagine this country's nuclear stockpile in the hands of a president who no longer understands the implications of pressing that pretty red launch button? With the military suffering the same losses as everyone else, they won't have the expertise to prevent it, either. Look, no technology can be supported without a minimum number of people who can understand it and work with it. We're this close to losing everything we've gained from ten thousand years of civilization, and you're the only person on the planet that can do something about it."

He looked doubtful. "Me."

"That's right." Barry pointed at the remnants of the crowd scattered across the lawn. "We were depending on the ability of these and other grassroots groups to hold together despite losses from Burnout Fever — or whatever you want to call it — but with what happened a little while ago, that's all out the window. Do you see all that crap lying around — the abandoned signs? We just had a mass exodus. There was a wave of Burnout Fever, sure, but something else happened as well. Something changed. Something basic. The only people who stayed behind were the ones with

a personal stake in their issue. The rest were here because they could relate to it, because they could feel what it would be like to be poisoned by GMOs or what an animal feels like when we destroy its habitat. But now, nobody can do that anymore. I don't understand why or how it happened, but one thing I do know for certain is that your group is the only one out here that remained intact."

Jeffries glanced at his minions. "Well, sure. They all have something to gain from outing the people in their way."

"And that's why we need your help. Derek Boa tells me that you're the best organizer there is. Anyone who's seen a news report or read a paper knows what you've been doing, and a lot of people have been hurt very badly as a result. I don't really care about that, and neither do these State Department negotiators. The world is in crisis, and you're our only hope for survival."

While Barry waited for him to respond, he calmed himself and shifted his focus back to the mystical field in his imagination. The leader of a dark army stood before him, its indistinct form cloaked in a turbulent twisting vortex, jagged with flying bits of debris. He steeled himself, and pushed his arm through the insubstantial barrier, into the wailing tornado before him, and closed his fist around the beating heart of the enemy. As he held it, buffeted by the flailing wind, he imagined a thousand voices giving thanks for saving their lives, and pushed the feeling towards his hand. But when he tried to push it into the heart he held, nothing happened. Straining to hold onto the squirming organ, he remembered Melanie's attack at UW, and focused so tightly on pushing through that everything else vanished. A moment later, he realized that something had changed, and saw that the heart in his fist had begun to glow. Satisfied, he pulled back and focused his eyes.

"All right," Jeffries said tentatively, "let's suppose for the moment that I help you. What do I get out of it?"

Before Barry had a chance to respond, a man in a hooded wool coat emerged from the mob and raised his fist defiantly. "Traitor! Infidel! Can't you see he's trying to manipulate you into turning from God's master plan and siding with the Devil?"

Jeffries whirled on him. "What's up your butt this time, Szendal?"

"Me? You're the one about to sell out, Malcolm. What do you expect the rest of us to do then?"

"I expect you to follow the rolebook, like I told you after you made a fool of yourself in that streetside fiasco with Lillian Haekson. Outing the damned is one thing, but publicly stalking a member of Congress is quite another."

Szendal fumed. "I was not stalking her!"

"Right. Tell that to all the people who saw your ugly face on the news. The last thing I need is a publicity-hound like you. Look, just because you drew the role of area leader doesn't mean you're more important than anyone else in the organization. I set this thing up the way I did so it would survive, so it wouldn't matter who was available, or if anyone got sick, damned or killed. If I want to give that task to someone else—"

He pulled his arm back and balled his fist, but before he had a chance to strike, Isalyn grabbed his elbow and spun him around. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Right. And who are you?"

She crossed her arms. "One of the damned. Now get back there and zip it."

Instead of returning to the crowd, Szendal left the circle of security workers and disappeared into the trees.

"Now then," Jeffries said, turning back towards Barry, "what do I get out of it?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much. Adulation. Celebrity. The thanks of the world. Stuff like that."

"Well, I don't know. I mean, look at how Szendal took it. Once you get people to buy into a role like that, it can be pretty hard for them to change direction."

Barry laughed. "But they are roles, aren't they? It's just theater, after all. And all it takes to turn a character around is a good writer. Your methods are damned effective, Malcolm. The way I hear it, you created a global following practically overnight. We need you. The world needs you."

"Then there really is a cure?"

"So I'm told. But unless you help us get it distributed, we'll never know. So what do you say?"

While Jeffries considered the offer, Barry took another look at the field in his imagination. The dark army had vanished, and the vortex before him had subsided, transformed into a dust-devil whirl of leaves and dust.

"Okay. I'll do it. On one condition."

Barry studied him for a second. "And that is...?"

"That you show me how you did it?"

"Did what?"

"Changed my mind like that."

"But I didn't. What I did was change your heart. And believe me, after what just happened, that's not the easiest thing in the world."

chapter seventy-FOUR

Dr. Morales stood in the doorway of the GMU building that housed The Green Iris, nervously scanning an arc of noisy reporters. It was about ten o'clock Saturday morning; Julian McKnight's sister Lauren had arrived a few minutes earlier with the first batch of PanAgra ChemCo's Burnout Fever cure. After she handed it off, the two of them stepped outside to wait with the hundreds of people — friends and family of other Burnout Fever patients — that filled the parking lot and overflowed onto the walkways and lawns of George Mason University.

"Don't worry about them," Amy Gratham assured her, "the news services have agreed to let me handle the interviews when you're done."

"Okay. Well, keep them occupied. We don't know how long this might take."

She turned and closed the door, then headed towards the lab that had been hastily fitted out as a treatment room. Rodney Falk was sitting on an examination table, chatting with Gisella Killarney when she walked in. The others were clustered around the room, whispering among themselves.

"...no, nothing like that," he told her. "I was telling them that Jeffries was an opportunist, that he didn't really believe in the cause he'd recruited them for, when suddenly a part of me seemed to just... well, disappear."

"I don't understand."

He shrugged. "Neither do I. When I was a kid, I could always tell when someone was porking the truth, like that deal with the umpire I sassed in eighth grade."

Gisella laughed. "The one making rancid calls against your buds. What about it?"

"Well, I kinda lost that clarity over the years. By the time I graduated, people's intentions had gotten a lot harder for me to dope out. It was like they were spitting clouds to hide behind. And yesterday... after the world blanked out like that, the clouds just vanished." He glanced at Morales. "I'm not so sure I want this cure to work."

"I understand. But surely there must be things about it that you don't like?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, sure. If I could afford it, I'd hire a translator like Melissa's Aunt Lilly did. But the legal clinic may spring for one. I'm sure they'd get a lot of mileage out my new ability, especially with some of the deadbeats who walk into that place."

Morales came closer. "I know it's your choice, Rodney, but we have to know how PanAgra's cure works, and you've only had Burnout Fever for less than a day. I don't want you to think that you're just another data point, but the sad fact is that you are. And we need to know. So what do you say? Can we do it?"

The room quieted. All eyes were on him.

Rodney crooked a finger at Derek. He crossed the room.

"Promise me something. If I don't come out of this alive, go down to the legal clinic and tell them what happened."

"Sure." Derek said awkwardly. "But why?"

He brightened. "Don't be a jerk, bro. I just want to give them a chance to help. Now let's get on with it!"

Dr. Morales opened a medicine cabinet, and took out a syringe, a small vial, and a palm-sized gadget with PanAgra's logo on the side. She drew a small amount of blood, and injected it into the device. A few seconds later, it beeped. She looked at it and shook her head. "According to this, you don't have much of the breakdown product in your blood."

He looked up at her. "Is that important?"

"Yes. PanAgra's cure is supposed to neutralize the effects of the breakdown product on your brain. But with the concentration so low, it's not clear whether that's why you've got Burnout Fever. You didn't have much of their new chocolate, did you?"

He shook his head. "It's not that I didn't want to. I tried it, but couldn't deal with the extended rush, so I went back to the conventional ones. So what now?"

"We'll still do the experiment, but we'll also need a subject with a much higher concentration in their blood. So lie down, and I'll give you a shot."

Barry walked over after she'd finished. "Could you explain something to me, Dr. Morales?" "I'll try."

He looked back at Rodney for a moment. "Melanie and I had pretty much the same amount of the Durabars. So did our friend Ronnie Kovak over there. But only Melanie got Burnout Fever. How do you explain that? I mean, we all must have the same concentration of the stuff in our blood, so what's the difference between us? Why her and not me?"

Morales frowned. "We faced the same question about the security workers and the hospital staff. If it affected everyone the same way, they should all have Burnout Fever, just like Isalyn Maufry. After all, their consumption was far higher than yours. Just ask McKnight. So there has to be another factor at work, something that determines your susceptibility to the effect, or dictates how much disruption is needed before the amygdala responds."

"Like what? How much you use the ability to shift contexts? Something like that?"

"Is that what you think?"

He nodded. "Yes, at least sometimes. Take Ms. Maufry, for example. From what Derek tells me, she wasn't one of the duty guards. Her job was working with the tech systems, so she was constantly switching back and forth between the universe of people and the one of computer networks, passwords and so forth. The others didn't have to do that."

"And Melanie?"

"Well, what with bouncing around among her freelance contracts, she did a lot of shifting contexts, but then so did I since I work as a negotiator. I don't see the difference. It's inconsistent."

"There may be another factor, you know." It was Melissa. "If, as Sheralyn suggests, the effects of Burnout Fever come from the loss of a connection to a higher being, then the connection itself is probably involved. I don't know, maybe something about how strong the connection is. Besides, didn't we decide that the group cases happen when an entity loses touch with a bunch of us at once? Those people don't need to have had any Durabars at all."

Morales agreed. "If that's true, then since Rodney was part of a group, the serum shouldn't have any affect at all. Which reminds me..." She checked her watch. "It's time to take a blood sample."

The room held its collective breath as she bent to insert the needle. "Well?" she said as she removed it, "do you feel any different?"

He thought for a moment. "No. Not that I can tell."

When the test kit beeped, she brought it over to show the research team. "Just as they said, the fragments have been neutralized. But we still haven't proven anything. We need to test this on someone who got Burnout Fever as a singleton."

Melanie walked over to Rodney's bed and turned around. "That would be me."

chapter seventy-FIVE

Malcolm Jeffries leaned back in the soft leather desk chair and admired the room. As State Department offices went, it was only third-tier, and the artifacts of the owner's travels only served to punctuate the clutter, but it was still a huge step up from the squalor he usually surrounded himself with.

Priscilla Karnoy sat across from him, a borrowed satphone pressed to her ear. She nodded, and set it on the desk. "Ok, I've got him on the line."

He held it gingerly for a moment before speaking. "Governor Rice?"

"Yes, Mr. Jeffries. I understand you've asked for our help. What can we do for you?"

"As Ms. Karnoy told you, I'm working with what's left of the State Department to distribute PanAgra's cure for the effects of Burnout Fever. I'd like to enlist your coalition of state governors to coordinate domestic transport. We've lined up a fleet of commercial jets from the various carriers to deliver it to major air hubs, but we still need to get it into every city and town. CDC people will work with what's left of your local hospital staffs to set up clinics, and we've got people working on announcements for distribution through the media, to convince patients to go for treatment."

"I'm sure you know how the coalition feels about unfunded federal mandates, Mr. Jeffries. How will the costs be covered?"

"That's just the thing, sir," Jeffries said. "At this point, there really isn't a federal government any more. It's fallen apart. All that's left to pull things back together are people like us. I don't work for the government, you see. So if you can find a way to help us to save the world, I'm sure your cooperation will be rewarded later."

Karnoy held a hand up in protest. "What are you doing?" she said quietly.

"I'll tell you what," Rice said, "I'll discuss this with the others, and call you back."

"Thank you, sir. We appreciate any help that you can offer." After ending the call, he ground his teeth and snorted. "What a cretin! The world's in the dumper, and he's still got his hand out?"

"Hey," Karnoy said, "you're the one who dangled a bribe in front of him. What was that all about?"

He rose and stood by the window. "I was just thinking about Mr. Lincoln down there; immortalized for doing something he had no authority over."

"The Emancipation Proclamation?"

He nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't like he actually freed anyone, but he did help to set that outcome into motion. I think we're in sort of the same position."

"About what?"

"Making a new start. Replacing a form of government that outlasted its usefulness with something harder to game. Revolution is an emotional gambit. It plays to the subconscious and drives people to commit to all kinds of things. But emotional arguments were also the bedrock from which the lure of money subverted the concept of representational democracy in this country. And as things stand, they won't work any more. Not for grassroots groups like Derek's; not for corporate puppeteers like the International Chamber of Commerce; not for governments; not for anyone."

There was a knock at the door, and Irene Salic breezed in. "Listen, you two," she said hastily, "I don't know much about protocol, but it seems to me we've got a problem with Mr. Jeffries' former minions. Your negotiators have been talking to them until they're blue in the face, but they just don't get it. They insist on getting any change of orders through the rolebook, whatever the crap that is. Do either of you know what they're jabbering about?"

Jeffries frowned. "Yeah. That's my activist pattern repository; a set of scripts that people can use to take part in an action. I distributed them on the web, in newsgroups, on forums, in blogs, the whole nine yards. The ones I wrote were pretty straightforward, easy for anyone to latch onto and dive into character. They had a single objective: find and out the damned. Unfortunately, Viktor Szendal wasn't content with following my lead, and he started changing them. So now there's a zoo of patterns out there."

"Out where? Have you tried to use the Internet lately? What do we do?"

"Somehow, we've got to find and pull all of the old scripts, replace them, and convince the people who've been following them to take a different tack. As you've noticed, the tricky part is going to be changing their minds. I used a lot of subtle tricks to get past their defenses, and it'll take more of the same to undo the programming I got them to swallow. That's a mountain of writing, and it'll take a serious amount of semantic layering." He threw up his hands. "I can't do this. There's just too much. I need some help."

The satphone rang, and Karnoy picked it up. "Yeah? Oh, hi Barry. What is it? Really? Okay. Put her on." She handed it to Jeffries.

"Hello?"

"Mr Jeffries, this is Melanie Stroub. Can you use a good writer? I come highly recommended."

chapter seventy-SIX

The West Seattle sandwich shop was already packed when Barry opened the door for Melanie. He had become something of a local celebrity in his absence, and most of the people who had joined, or even seen their Sunday morning preacher-bashings at one time or another had shown up early.

Hi, guys!" Al beckoned from a table near the back, and crooked a thumb towards the counter. "Ronnie's got your order up."

"Hey Barry," Sasha said happily as they reached her table. "Thanks for all you did. Clive got the cure last week, and his leg's healed, so I've got a riding partner again."

Clive stood and extended his arm. "Yes. Thank you."

"It wasn't just me, you know," he confided as they shook hands. "And besides, not everyone responds. Be happy you weren't part of a group burnout. The CDC still doesn't know what to do for them."

"So tell us," Sasha said, "what's this all about, anyway? Why'd you ask everyone to join you this morning if there's no preacher left to bash?"

He smiled. "Wait. It's almost time."

Ronnie mated cups to their hands and got them seated. "Welcome back, doll. I'm glad you're showing those rust and gold highlights again. You just weren't the same without them."

"Is that what this has all been about? My hairstyle?"

While Melanie was busily slurping latte foam, he stood and raised his cup to the room. "I'd like to propose a toast." Discussion abated almost immediately. He scanned the crowd. "To Reverend Wilfred McQuarry, whose sermons gave us such pleasure, and whose followers caused such grief. May he sleep with the Angels!"

Melanie looked up at him gravely, a dab of foam on her nose. "You do know that he was part of a group Burnout, don't you? That means he's still toast."

"Ouch. You can sit there and say that with a straight face?"

"Yeah," she giggled, "and you have no idea how happy it makes me."

"Okay, everyone," Barry said over the growing din, "it's time. There's a new program on one of the Government Access channels that I wanted all of you to see. So gather 'round." He rose and pressed the power button on the overhead TV.

A subtly animated version of Schwabe's Angel and the Gravedigger filled the screen, with light from the flickering green flame she held dancing against the angel's uplifted face. The image faded to that of a woman whose face looked remarkably like that of the Angel.

"Good morning. I'm Sheralyn Fornét. For those of you who were regular viewers of Reverend McQuarry's weekly sermons," she said easily, "I am not continuing that series of talks. As you probably know, after the Reverend fell victim to Burnout Fever, his final pronouncements were used to stir up a great deal of trouble. Fortunately, they also helped to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta towards an understanding of what had happened, and thereby to begin doing something about it."

"Today, I am starting something new, something that I hope will help many of you to learn how to cope with the changes that have come over the world recently. When the CDC first set out to investigate the cause of Burnout Fever, they had no idea that their search would lead to realms in which they had neither knowledge nor experience, and force them to call in specialists from fields that had nothing to do with Medicine, and within which the scientific method did not apply."

"That I ended up in the middle of their inquiry surprised nobody more than it did me. After Reverend McQuarry took ill, and the Shasta Lake Commune dispersed, I was preparing to shut down the center and hand it over to new owners. My life seemed to have run out of steam, and I was quickly coasting to a halt. But then something unexpected happened: I received a phone call from the woman I would like to introduce you to today, a CDC researcher named Elena Morales." The camera pulled back to a two-shot, showing the women seated at a table. "Dr. Morales?"

She smiled. "Good morning. I'm glad to be in friendly company for a change.

Reporters can get rather surly when they only see you as the bearer of bad news.”

“It’s good to have you here.” Fornét looked at the camera. “I was privileged to have taken part in the CDC’s discussions that unearthed the explanation for Burnout Fever, and have been retained as a consultant.” She looked again at Morales. “I suspect your request raised a lot of eyebrows in Atlanta.”

“Not just there. News that the CDC had involved members of the religious and metaphysical community in what was thought to have been a purely scientific pursuit drew intense interest from around the world. Religious scholars, researchers from a wide range of specialties, as well as constitutional and legal analysts all suddenly found themselves embroiled in a controversy over how to deal with what should have been clearly defined jurisdictional boundaries. In revealing the truth behind Burnout Fever, we’ve thrown a monkey wrench into just about everything.”

Fornét nodded. “But will any of this affect ordinary people? Should it even matter to them?”

“I’m glad you asked. If it weren’t for the cooperation of ordinary people like constitutional activist Derek Boa and greeting card artist Melissa Fox, none of this would have been possible. In fact, the biggest problems we had to overcome in distributing the cure were handled by a couple from Seattle, freelance negotiator Barry Lieber and the first person to be cured of Burnout Fever, a talented writer by the name of Melanie Stroub. Our teams of field researchers were helped by hundreds of volunteers, and the data collection that made it possible to characterize the spread of the disease was instigated in the name of a teenager named Iris, who I am pleased to report has made a full recovery. I salute you all.”

A raucous cheer swept the crowd, drowning Fornét’s response in a cacophony of congratulations. From the middle of it, Melanie raised her latte cup overhead. “I have another toast!”

People rushed back to their tables to grab their cups, and stood as one, waiting. “To chocolate messes: may they melt in your hands, not in your mind!”

chapter seventy-SEVEN

Arthur Fox smiled sheepishly as he pulled into the GMU parking lot. “Lilly, did I ever tell you about the time I was booed off the stage here?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, a devilish twinkle in her eye, “but I imagine you must have deserved it.”

He feigned a hurt look when she turned to close her door. “It was my Junior year, and I was running for Class Historian.”

“Melissa showed me your yearbook pictures. You were quite the dweeb back then. So what was your plan? Did you think running for office would get you a date?”

As they started across the sparsely occupied parking lot, he warmed to the memories. “Well, it did, but that’s beside the point. I’d gotten some friends to canvass for me, and it was beginning to look like I had a shot at the election.”

She giggled. “With a run-up like that, you must have had a spectacular downfall.”

Fox looked away, a loud sigh exaggerating his faux exasperation. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

She stopped a few feet from the door. “Well, come on, Arthur. I didn’t get to see your first real campaign, either. So what happened? How embarrassing was it?”

He looked around once they were inside, and headed right. “It’s this way, as I recall. Anyway, since I was the last candidate to speak, I paid special attention to the humor that the others had used to play the crowd.”

"Let me guess: you forgot the joke you planned to use?"

They'd reached the conference room door, and he paused with his hand over the knob. "Worse. I kit-bashed the jokes of two other candidates, and didn't realize what had happened until I was halfway through the mismatched punch line. It was a good thing nobody had any throwing tomatoes, but the effect was about the same."

"Now I understand."

"What?"

"Why you're always so serious at—"

The door swung into Fox's foot. He whisked Lilly out of the way just as a grossly overweight man shaking a half-eaten donut backed into the hallway.

"I'm a lawyer, not a psychic!" he railed. "How do you expect me — how do you expect anyone — to speak from someone else's point of view? I'll argue any case for enough money, but there's no way I'm going to put myself in their place. Not for you, Lauren, and certainly not for the likes of a whining simp like Boa!"

Haekson glared up at him. "'Whining simp' is he? Look, fatty, I don't know who the hell you think you are, but one thing I do know is that Derek Boa is no simp! If it weren't for him, the world would be in a lot sadder shape than it is right now. So if you don't want to be part of this, then leave. We'll all be better off without you."

"The name's Scarloti, Congresswoman Haekson," he said haughtily. "Don't expect to be re-elected." He glanced at Fox. "Either of you."

Fox watched him waddle off. "What was that all about?"

"I can't say I didn't expect it," Derek said as he approached. "Our exploration strategy relies pretty heavily on the ability to emulate other stakeholders, stepping into their shoes for a bit. But since things changed, that doesn't work too well, and we're playing it by ear. As I understand it, Scarloti was here under duress, so I'm not surprised he bailed."

Haekson frowned. "Can we still do this without him?"

He nodded. "I think so. At least we could before. Come on in, both of you, and join the fun. Melissa stepped out for a moment; she'll be right back."

A disturbed-looking woman, whose French braid seemed out of place over a drab business suit, came up behind Derek. "I'm sorry about that," she said, gazing past them into the hallway. "Oh, I'm sorry." She extended her arm. "I'm Lauren Ackley. You may have met my brother, Julian McKnight. He's the one who blackmailed my boss into coming with me. I hope this doesn't ruin your plans, Mr. Boa?"

"We'll be okay," Derek said. "But it looks like you'll have to represent both the corporate lobby and public relations angles now, since Mr. Scarloti chose to leave. Think you can handle it?"

She shrugged. "I don't see why not. Enough of Julian's specialty must have rubbed off on me by now."

Derek led them towards a knot of people rearranging tables and chairs at the far end of the room. "Got a minute Amy? They're here."

Gratham set down the chair she was carrying and joined them. "It's good to see you again, Congresswoman Haekson. I was glad to hear that you were among the lucky ones."

"So was I. Which reminds me: I've been meaning to have a talk with you about spying on me."

She straightened. "Oh, right. The Rayburn Building. Look, I was only doing my job. If I caused you any—"

"Trouble? Heavens, no. In fact, that piece you did has been entered into the Congressional Record. I'm glad you did it. But what happened to your cameraman? Didn't he get Burnout Fever that night?"

Gratham nodded. "Yes. Unfortunately, he wasn't as lucky as you. As far as the CDC knows, he was a singleton, too. But even though they neutralized the molecule in his blood, he still hasn't recovered." She turned to Fox. "And how's your treatment going, Congressman? My contacts at the Neurological Institute tell me that they're already back up to half staff."

"Perhaps another time. I'd rather my condition not get onto the front page."

She laughed. "There's not much chance of that. At least not by telling me about it. I've quit the business. After helping Derek organize the grass roots groups, I decided to join his team. I'm the Activist Coalition's spokesperson now."

"And she's a damned good one, too," Derek said happily.

A sandy-haired young man interrupted them. "Okay, folks. The tables are in place. We're

ready any time.”

“Thanks, Ted. Come on, let’s get this started.”

Six tables made a circle at the front of the room. Each one had a paper sign facing inward. Fox and Haekson sat with their backs to the door at the table marked ‘Government’. Lauren Ackley sat to their left, trying to get the ‘Corporate Interests/PR’ sign to stand up. Amy Gratham sat down behind the ‘Press’ sign and opened a notepad. Gisella Killarney, her long red hair tied back, sat directly across from Fox and Haekson, at the ‘Activists/Citizens/Labor’ table. To her right was Ted Maliq at the ‘Education’ table. And finally, Dr. Orvielle Namidy closed the circle at the ‘Religion’ table.

Derek, who stood grinning in the middle of the circle, looked up when the door opened again. “Melissa. Good, you’re back. Take your place and we can begin.”

She crossed the room and stopped a few yards outside the circle, behind the Government table. “Hi Dad. Hi Aunt Lilly.”

Lilly turned around. “Hello, cupcake. Why are you standing back there?”

“Oh. Didn’t anyone tell you? I’m representing the entities’ point of view.”

“All right, then,” Derek said solemnly. “We all saw Mr. Scarloti’s reaction to what I’ve asked you to do. He’s hardly unique. People everywhere are scared to death of living in a world stripped of the ability to empathize with strangers; hell, it’s difficult enough to empathize with your own family anymore. But that’s not the worst of it. Far too many critical people have been lost to Burnout Fever, despite the best efforts of the Activist Coalition, the CDC and the World Health Organization. Somehow, we need to overcome these losses, or as UN Futurist Myamar Hounté warned, we will lose our hold on the technology that holds the modern world together. That’s why I’ve asked you all here today. We’re going to conduct an experiment. Miss Kilarney here developed a successful strategy for exploring difficult situations, but it relies on the very ability that we’ve now lost. If we can find a way to make it work, it may be possible to give the world another chance.”

“Okay,” Fox said, “so how do we start?”

“With an explanation of our current situation.” He looked over the Congressman’s head.

“Melissa?”

“One of the things we learned in the course of investigating the spread of Burnout Fever was that this world is not what it seems. As real as it may appear to us, we’re all still living in a collaborative dream created and supported by the participation of beings that exist in another realm. Reverend McQuarry called them angels. Masra, the one that Dr. Namidy and I spoke with at the CDC, preferred the term entity. When my Aunt Lilly got Burnout Fever, what really happened was that she lost the connection to her higher being — her guardian angel or entity. Group burnouts happen when an entity becomes so damaged by this that it loses its connection to many of us at once.”

Gratham raised a finger. “Tell me something, then. My cameraman, Lee, wasn’t part of a group burnout, so why didn’t he recover after he got the cure?”

“I haven’t spoken to Masra since then, but I suspect it’s because the entity Lee was connected to succumbed to the accumulated damage after he got Burnout Fever. That means there must have been a group case associated with the same entity later on. You could call it an odd sort of family relationship, I guess.”

“Getting back on topic,” Derek said, “what’s the relationship between the entities you represent and the interactions among stakeholders in the circle?”

“Yes. That is the key to this whole experiment, isn’t it? A secular government like ours purposely blinds itself to an aspect of the human condition in the interest of protecting the citizen’s right to whatever form of religious belief they choose to engage in.”

Namidy cleared her throat. “May I jump in here for a moment?”

“Sure.”

“The alternative doesn’t have to be a religious state like Israel. I think we’re looking for a radically different approach to governance that respects both the people of this world, and the entities whose continued healthy existence makes our world possible.”

“Well said.” Derek concluded. “Our first step is to get a better understanding of the needs and expectations of each group represented. Gisella, since you developed the process, would you please start us off?”

“Sure.” She looked around the circle. “It all comes down to people. No matter which of the other groups a person might be part of, they’re still the ultimate players in the game of life. In a

way, we're no different from the entities we rely on, so I suppose I could be speaking for them as well. People need what all of the other groups provide, and we need it in healthy and balanced ways, but that's not always how we get it."

"I guess I'll go next," Ted Maliq said, a bit uncertainly. "Formal education, like they do here at GMU, seems to narrow people's perspectives, and guide them along certain accepted furrows of thought. The balance that Gisella mentioned is traded for expertise, and that restricts everyone's universe of interactions." He looked to his left. "Dr. Namidy?"

She nodded graciously. "It's curious to me how all of this really comes down to a matter of faith. And I'm not only talking about religion, here. Unless you have first hand experience about something, you have no choice but to accept someone else's word for it on faith. It's as true for physics as much as it is for the Eucharist." Namidy gestured towards Fox and Haekson. "We accept the authority of government on the strength of our faith in its good intentions. When that faith is shattered, people have reason to protest, and ultimately to overthrow that government."

Lillian grinned. "Then what happens when people's faith in their religion is shattered? Should they burn down the churches?"

"It's a good question. Most of the time they simply leave the fold; if enough of them do that, the religion folds. Fear of that outcome is probably what drove church leaders along the paths of power and emotional coercion."

"Fortunately for us," Fox added, "that sort of pressure won't work too well anymore." He turned to look at Lauren Ackley. "Which to my way of thinking is just fine, because it's been overused by corporate interests to sway votes in Congress. So the empathy problem could also work to our favor."

"You're right," Ackley acceded. "I represent a particularly hard-hit stakeholder in this round-robin. Public relations work relies very heavily on the effectiveness of emotional arguments, as does the advertising industry, and business profits ride on their success. Plus, with so many critical employees permanently lost to Burnout Fever, a lot of businesses won't be able to maintain the technology they depend on, much less the tech they're building. So what do we do? If businesses can't survive in this new world, we'll have a global depression with no escape."

"Business isn't alone in that boat," Lilly echoed. "Government, and especially the military, is heavily dependent on that same technology."

"As is academia," Namidy added.

"That's a pretty grim future," Gratham said sadly. "Not the sort of thing that will sell papers. And yet it's the news sector that's responsible for educating people about current events. But what can we do? I tried getting the grass roots groups together as a unified force to fill the power vacuum when government faltered, but then the change happened, and their stability went out the window, too."

"Good." Derek, who had been leaning against Ted's table, returned to the circle's center. "That's precisely what we need to explore. Now that we have an idea of what's at stake and how some of the interactions work, our next step is to look at the situation from one another's points of view. I was trying to explain this part to Mr. Scarloti when he stormed out."

"Mind if I start round two?" Melissa said suddenly.

"Shoot."

"Okay. Now keep in mind that I'm speaking for the entities here. Even though I don't have a clue what life is like for them, I do know that losing a connection to one of us is like having your arm, or a piece of your memory sliced off. Our world is like a sim game for them, except they just learned that they could be hurt by what happens here. We've built all sorts of structures to organize our lives — governments, religions, businesses and so forth — and now we have what I guess you could think of as a weapon that could be used against them. I have to imagine that they're actually a bit scared of what they've done. In a way, you could say that they're having a crisis of faith in us, as bizarre as that might sound. So, when I..."

She froze.

Derek jumped over Ackley's table and rushed to her side. "Melissa? What's wrong?"

Fox and Haekson rose as one. Lillian took a step closer. "It can't be Burnout Fever, can it?"

"If it is," Derek said, still examining her eyes, "it would have to be a group one, but Dr.

Morales said they stopped happening soon after the cure was distributed."

Melissa shook, as if jolted by some kind of shock. She wet her lips and rubbed her eyes.

"Melissa?" Derek asked again.

She smiled at him. "It's okay, Derek. We're both here."

Namidy knocked over her chair getting up. "Both? What's going on?"

Melissa bowed subtly. "Hello, Dr. Namidy. It's good to see you again."

"Masra?"

"Very good. I wasn't sure if you would recognize me in this host."

Namidy came closer. "I don't understand. I thought Sheralyn Fornét...?"

"She was, but that was before the — how can I explain this — before the reality shift. Do you recall when I explained that the relationships among entities and their dream selves were dynamic?"

"Sure, but how does...?"

Melissa twitched. "I'll take it. Remember the dream I told you about at the CDC meeting? The one where I was a spider and my threads connected to dream lives? I figure it this way: somehow, Masra's threads got reattached, but not to the same places they were. Is that right?"

Her stance changed again. "Essentially. I now appear to have a different suite of extensions. Some of my dream selves remain as they were, but others were replaced and added. In your terms, I've adopted you into my family."

Derek opened his palms. "But why here? Why now?"

"Because what you're doing is important. In order to straighten this mess out, we have to work on a solution from both sides. And that means I'll be dropping in from time to time. In my realm, we're doing much the same as you are right now. It's the kind of magic that only works when both sides cooperate. That's why the connection was easy to establish. Oh, and speaking of connections, please accept my congratulations, Mr. Boa."

"About what?"

She tilted her head. "Your nuptials, of course. Haven't you told anyone yet?"

Fox laughed. "Well, that's a hell of a way to find out your daughter's getting married!" He eyed Derek suspiciously. "When did you ask her?"

"Just before you got here. That's why she was in the bathroom."

Lillian threw her arms wide and gave Melissa a hug. "That's wonderful, dear. Have you picked a date?"

She glanced at her father. "We were thinking about January 17th, the anniversary of when you two met, up at the lodge."

He regarded her sternly. "I don't know, cupcake. I heard they were booked that night."

Lillian turned and crossed her arms. "Well? Are you going to tell her, or should I?"

"Tell me what?"

She smiled. "It'll have to be a double ceremony, that's all."

Ted held his arm up. "Great. I'm happy for all of you. But please, I've got an appointment this afternoon. Could we get back to why we came here already?"

chapter seventy-EIGHT

The Winter Solstice always held a certain fascination for Melanie. The cycles that permeated her life always seemed to start at the bleakest possible moment, blossom into unfathomable joy, and then fade gracefully away like the darkening sunset sky into a vast canopy of velvet, a-twinkle with possibility. The cycles of Barry's life, in contrast, usually started at the human equivalent of the Autumnal Equinox, as if his world was perennially perched at the apex of that first big hill of life's roller coaster.

She'd spent the day in seclusion, quietly meditating on the deeper meaning of the twilight world she'd been thrown into, and wondering how it was reflected in the experiences of whatever Angels or Entities she shared with unrevealed metaphysical brothers and sisters in this or some other dreamlike reality. Out of curiosity, she opened the sketchbook that had so consumed her after getting Burnout Fever, and flipped to the last page, the one in which she had broken through her deterioration of Angels to reveal a lone figure at a candle-lit table.

Staring into that shadowed face was like gazing into the darkness of a scrying glass, a dim

reflection of self against the mists of forever. Her fingers hovered over the man's face, as if she could reach through eternity to grasp a glimpse of life through his eyes. Reflections, she knew, didn't always show what lay before them. Sometimes, they revealed what lay beyond. Her quarry lay like an apparition down a hall of mirrors, a tantalizing possibility that in some way it was a reflection of herself.

She felt that her compulsion with Angels had become a fascination with Ferlinghetti's Beat universe for a reason, and now that she was able to investigate it properly, doing so was proving to be a problem. Before the change, before it had become a chore to even make an emotional connection with friends and family, Melanie had often sprinkled moments of meditation into her life like seeds cast across fertile ground. Now, things were different. It took longer to reach the calm center of her soul, and it took effort to bridge the emotional chasm that now loomed between people.

Barry had been the first to discover this when he'd struggled with Jeffries on the Capitol Mall, but he wasn't the last. The change was expressed in many ways. The most visible of these was the sudden rise in crimes of detachment. The unspoken concern for strangers that once fueled common courtesies that made life in crowded cities possible was gone, and with that fire smoldering, traffic had gotten worse and lines that used to form on their own now had to be enforced. Theft had risen as well, with the added insult that the police still active had lost any concern for those they were supposed to be protecting. The world was growing more impersonal by the day, a trend that Melanie found deeply disturbing.

The Winter Solstice had long been her personal New Year's Day, a holiday from the rush of want and expectation that could turn an otherwise engaging job into an endless round of niggling detail. Barry had been called to intervene at a particularly raucous company meeting that should have been over by now, and she was enjoying the solitude when the soothing gurgle of their tabletop spring was overwhelmed by the wail of the phone.

She fought the impulse to answer it, choosing instead to let the machine take a message, but turned to listen just the same. When she realized who it was, she leaned over and hit the speaker button. "Yeah, hi Melissa. What can I do for you?"

"I'm glad I caught you home. Is Barry around?"

She glanced at the door. "No, but he should be back soon. Is there a problem?"

"No, but I was hoping to hear his reaction in person."

"Reaction to what?" she said conspiratorially.

"Oh nothing. It's just an invitation to a ski resort next month."

"A what? But neither of us ski!"

Melissa laughed. "You won't have to. It's a double wedding."

"A dou—? So Derek finally got up the nerve? That's wonderful. Who's the other lucky couple? Do we know them?"

"My dad and Aunt Lilly. It's going to be strange calling her mom, though."

"Oh, that's great, Melissa. They make such an adorable couple, after all. Send us the details, and we'll make travel arrangements. You wouldn't believe the special treatment we got from the airline on the way back to Seattle. I guess having an in with the traffic controllers can come in handy."

"I guess."

"So what's been going on back in DC since I wrote Jeffries' mob their new marching orders?"

Melissa didn't answer immediately, and when she did, her tone was somewhat subdued.

"Derek got some people together to see how Constitutional Evolution's exploration process worked after... well, after we all lost the ability to empathize easily."

"Yeah. I've been thinking about the change myself. So how did it go?"

"Well, a tubby lawyer I couldn't stand stormed out before we even got started. It seemed to go all right at first, but the more we got into the meat of it, the more obvious it became that we have another huge problem to deal with."

She slid closer to the phone. "What is it this time? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Let me put it to you this way: how do you feel about writing instructions for people?"

Melanie shrugged. "I'm a writer. What's not to like?"

"We're going to need a boatload of it. With all of the people who didn't respond to PanAgra's Burnout Fever cure, there aren't enough qualified people left to keep the world's tech going. Things will start to straighten out in a few years, but for now we need a way for unqualified people to operate the tech, and for people who still have BF to do something a bit more useful than

flipping burgers. All that will take a mountain of instructions. We figure we'll need to organize the writers who are left into a depression-era WPA-style army of writers like you to collect the wisdom of the people who still know how to do things, and make sure it's down in writing that doesn't require yet more tech to read. But the thing is, that's not the worst of it."

"What else?"

"It's the effect of the change. One of the things we discovered during our session is that representative government isn't the only social contract dependent on the ability we all just lost. But if government won't work, there's not much point in the other things."

Melanie took a breath. "So what are you going to do?"

"Derek's organizing a major conference for just after New Year's to talk about what kind of a government will have to be created to deal with the effects of the change. He's lining up people from what's left of the government, as well as business leaders, activists and I forget who else."

"Do you need us to fly back out for this?"

"Would you? We're going to have to explain an awful lot of things to an awful lot of people in order to make it work."

"Of course," Melanie said, glancing at her sketch again. "In fact, I was kind of expecting something like this."

"You were? Why is that?"

"It's the Winter Solstice."

chapter seventy-NINE

"What brings you to the Big Apple, folks?" the cabby asked mechanically when the parkway traffic ground to a crawl. "You should've been here last night. I gotta tell you, there's something just wrong about a New Year's Eve countdown without the old light ball."

Barry gazed out the window, studying the traffic wardens stationed at each controlled intersection they passed. "We're helping with next week's Governance Conference at the UN."

"Oh? What's that about, anyway?"

When he didn't reply right away, Melanie said, "The world's changed, and a lot of things we used to depend on no longer work. Government's one of them."

The cabby glanced over his shoulder. "I don't know where you come from, lady, but that's all I see anymore. I mean, take a look at those goons minding the intersections. Looks like government to me. So what doesn't work?"

She smiled. "Okay, I'll grant you that, but enforcement is the easy part of governing. We're working on the hard part, finding a new way to set up representation so the government has a fighting chance of actually doing the public's will."

He chuckled. "Oh, right. Like they ever did that."

"Even if they did it badly before, it's far worse now, after the change and all."

"The what?" Traffic was picking up speed again.

"The change, or whatever it's called around here. When people suddenly lost the ability to relate with strangers."

"Lady, you've never been to New York, have you? The only reason a place this crowded works is that people learned how to ignore each other. What happened last month just evened the playing field, that's all. Now the rest of the world is in the same boat, too. So anyway, what's the plan for this shindig?"

"We'll have to play it by ear, mostly. Our first problem is figuring out how to get the players to agree to treat one another as equals. They've always been adversaries until now."

"Oh? Who's supposed to be coming into town for this thing?"

Melanie leaned forward a bit. "All kinds of people. There'll be a grab bag of factions, even worse than the usual crowd at the UN. Instead of diplomats from around the world, we've called in folks from every level of government, leaders from both business and labor, people from dozens of different fields, activists of all flavors, you name it. It's going to get really noisy in the General

Assembly.”

“And you expect anything useful to come out of a mess like that?”

She sat back. “I certainly hope so. The world might not survive if it doesn’t.”

chapter EIGHTY

It was nearly noon, and people had been streaming into the General Assembly Building for hours. Because the Governance Conference wasn’t UN business, the usual security staff was absent, replaced temporarily by a mélange of security workers drawn from a variety of public and private sources, their various uniforms set off by blue UN armbands. Earlier in the day, their skein of dissimilar uniforms stood out among the gathering crowd like gumdrops in a bowl of jellybeans, but as the room filled up, they blended into the background, just another faction among the myriad.

Governor Rice followed a noisy group of longshoremen through the door and made his way down to the seats that had been reserved for his band of disaffected Governors. He was standing in the aisle, folding his coat, when a familiar voice called his name from the row behind him.

“Well, well, Douglas. I can’t say I’m surprised to see you here.”

He turned to look. “I thought it was you, Ned. But I must say I’m surprised they invited members of the Senate to this meeting.”

Senator Fortaigh angled his chair slightly. “As far as I can tell, the rabble in this room aren’t very likely to be able to govern a rat into a cage, much less replace the fine set of checks and balances that we’ve relied on in this country for over two hundred years.”

Rice shot him a withering glance. “That’s a laugh. But then you don’t have to deal with the effects of all the mindless legislation you and your corporate masters foist on the states and the people every year.”

Fortaigh rose to his feet. “You’ll watch your words if you value the federal funds that your constituents depend on, sir!”

“What a crock. I don’t remember the last time the people of Illinois actually benefited from anything you phonies in Washington allegedly did for them. And besides, those federal funds you’re always crowing about don’t really exist. You’ve been wallowing in debt for so long that you couldn’t recognize a balanced budget if it climbed up your leg and bit you in the ass.”

“Why you...” The Senator pushed past two people in his haste to reach Rice, but came up short when a heavyset woman in a security uniform pushed between them.

Isalyn Maufrey pointed at her UN armband. “Do you see this? It means that you’re not in the US right now.”

Fortaigh shrugged. “Yeah, so what of it? You’re not exactly a UN peacekeeper, you know.”

She smiled. “Did you want to put some money on that? Special rules for a special situation. Now sit down, both of you, or neither of you will have a voice in this meeting.” She crowded Fortaigh. “I’ve wanted to get a shot at you ever since you humiliated Derek Boa when he was handcuffed at your hearing. So please, give me a reason to eject you. I promise you it won’t be pretty.”

While Rice took his seat, the overhead lights dimmed and the roar of a thousand conversations slowly gave way to an amplified voice from the podium. “Good Afternoon. My name is Malcolm Jeffries, and I’d like to welcome you all to the first session of the Governance Conference.”

Maufrey winced at the sound of his name. “Christ, who let that creep in?”

Jeffries waited for the room to quiet. “In roaming the crowd this morning, I heard many of you say that the UN is a strange place to be discussing ways to change how our government works. After all, the United States has a perfectly good constitution as it is. Unfortunately, in the wake of the change that happened just as we were getting ready to distribute a cure for Burnout Fever, we discovered that there was an unstated assumption in the ideas behind that document, an assumption that also lives in the heart of a great many other of mankind’s organizing principals.

This assumption is that people everywhere have an unspoken regard for one another, or to put it another way, we care.”

“In one way or another, this assumption has served as the basis for the codes of ethics underpinning all of the world’s religions. Whether you know it as a Christian — ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’, as a Wiccan — ‘An ye harm none, do what ye will’, or in any other form, the implication is still the same.”

“Representative government is no different, in that the people elected to represent you are charged with using concern for your wellbeing as the basis for deciding what laws to pass or how to interpret and enforce them. Business is founded on the principal of providing a useful product or service to strangers that you do not want to alienate, and labor unions rely on fellowship with strangers to promote the strength of numbers. Every one of you, in your personal life, in your jobs and in your hobbies, relies on this assumption every day. And yet for some reason that we do not yet understand, we have all been thrust into a world bereft of this assumption, a world in which harming none requires conscious choice and an act of will.”

“Which brings me back to the original question: why here? It’s simple, really. As many of you know, the United Nations is technically not on US soil. So, by coming here today, you have all stepped outside of the context of your lives, and entered a place created for the sole purpose of bringing strangers together. But instead of being delegates from nations across the world, you represent virtual states in places such as Government, the Activist community, Labor, Health Sciences, Academia, Entertainment, Technology and Sports.”

“In this new world, in a time when representing strangers has become a problem, the organizers of this conference decided that a better, more fruitful course, would be to develop ways to represent people we know far more intimately, because they are like ourselves. So instead of being a gathering of cities, states or nations, what we create here will be a gathering of common interests. And because each one of us has many interests, each of us will have many voices.”

“I thank each of you for attending, and hope that by the end of this first Governance Conference, we will all have a better understanding of what must be done to keep mankind from being the first species on Earth to go extinct through its own actions, or lack of them. And now, I would like to introduce our keynote speaker, the renowned UN Futurist, Myamar Hounté.”

chapter eighty-ONE

Arthur Fox set the empty champagne bottle down on the blue and white tufted placemat in the center of the table, and rubbed his neck. “Now that all of our guests are gone, maybe the four of us can get some skiing in before we have to leave.”

“I told you before, dad,” Melissa said, “neither of us can ski, and we don’t have much of an interest in learning, either.”

“Now, now, dear,” Haekson admonished her. “You know you’re in good hands. I wouldn’t let either of you get hurt.”

Derek studied the busy slope beyond the window. “I don’t know, ‘lissa. We couldn’t have a better teacher. And what better way to seal the event than by recreating your Dad’s covert courtship rite?”

She squeezed his arm. “What? You want to let my Aunt Lilly—”

“Your stepmother, dear.”

“—my stepmother, then. You want Lilly to teach us how to ski?”

“Why not, she is a certified ski instructor.”

“Sure, and I’m a microbiologist.”

Fox propped open an envelope that was on the table and removed a slip of paper. “It’s true, you know. They printed one up just for the occasion.” He handed it to her.

“This isn’t real, dad.”

He shrugged. “Not yet. But it will be soon enough.”

“Oh? Like when?”

Haekson laughed. "After I've taught you two how to ski, of course. When did you expect?"

"Oh, I give up. But just remember, anything you do or say can be turned into a greeting card for everyone to see."

"Good," Fox said abruptly. "So I guess it's time for that special dessert I've been kidding you about since we got here."

Melissa sipped champagne. "As long as it isn't cupcakes. So what is it, anyway?"

"You'll see." He signaled a nearby server, who turned and headed for the kitchen.

"While we're waiting," Derek said apprehensively, "you haven't said much about how you thought the Governance Conference went."

Fox nodded. "I've been thinking about that. At the very least, the fact that you managed to get all those people to speak as equals was an amazing accomplishment. The possibility of having an unbalanced confrontation usually leads to all sorts of power games that divert attention from the business at hand. How did you do it?"

"It was something I picked up from Barry. The key to it was convincing the Secretary General to let us hold the meeting at the UN. I don't think we could have done that without a great deal of help from Mr. Hounté. The pilgrimage to Manhattan was like a civil hajj. Having people leave their own world, as it were, and walk into what amounts to a temple of peace turned the Conference into what Barry and Melanie would call a magical act. That gave it power, making the event seem bigger than life. People defer to the perception of power, after all. Just look at the chain of deference that you work in."

"Or the buildings, for that matter," Haekson agreed. "But your temple had to be something that even those of us who are no longer awed by the marble catacombs in Washington would react to."

"Exactly. It's also why we couldn't invite any of the people who usually work or speak there, including the UN's own security force."

"All right," Fox said, idly fingering his wineglass. "So tell me this. After getting the various groups to respond like a set of tuned water glasses in your virtual line dance of cause and effect, how did you turn that cacophony into a set of process instructions so quickly? You must have had an army of writers and editors hiding in the basement."

"Pretty much, yeah. Melanie worked fiercely with Malcolm Jeffries to set up a rolebook for the various players that we needed for that operation. His methods are effective, regardless of how many enemies he's made by misusing them. So do you think the plan might work?"

Fox opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again as his face lit up and he followed something being carried towards them from the kitchen. "Here it is. It's time for dessert."

Melissa had started to turn around when her father held up a hand in protest. "Oh no you don't. Shut your eyes and wait until I tell you it's okay to look."

"Oh, daddy. Will you ever grow up?"

While she sat, stonily pressing her eyes closed, Fox moved the placemat, and the server set an odd-shaped chocolate cake on the table. It looked like a compass rose, with a circular body and what looked like a cupcake jammed into the four cardinal points. Each of the cupcake sections was decorated with the likeness of one of them on a colored background. Fox rotated the tray so that the corners were aligned properly. The middle of the cake was decorated with a web work of icing trickles connecting the corner portraits to one another and to a small domed marzipan battlement at the center. Perched on top of the marzipan was a set of four jellybeans, one the color of each of the portrait backgrounds.

"Okay, Melissa," he said, grinning broadly, "you can look now."

She frowned briefly, squinted a peek, then opened her eyes in surprise and broke out laughing. "That's wonderful. Who designed it?"

"Do you remember Fredrik Malden, the congressman from Rhode Island?"

She nodded. "Sure, he's the twin, isn't he?"

"That's right. His brother became a pretty good artist from all of the practice he got while he had Burnout Fever. This is his gift to all of us."

Melissa bent closer to examine it. "But how did he know about my dream?"

Derek laughed. "Or my obsession with Bartholdi Fountain?"

She stared at him. "For that matter, how did he know about the jellybeans at the end of Melanie's rainbow?"

Lilly held up her hands. "What are you to going on about, anyway?"

They glanced at one another conspiratorially. "Later. After you teach us to ski. Right now I'd

like to sample the gift. Who wants to eat my face?"

THE END